Navigating Multiple Archives across Southeast Asia: Three Questions I Wish I Had Known to Ask

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Introduction

This memo on multi-site archives regarding Southeast Asia is organized around three basic questions I wish I had known to ask when starting my dissertation research. My project examined opium and colonial state formation, and the main sources I consulted were government documents at the national archives of the UK, France, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Cambodia.[1] While I focused on English and French language records from the pre-World War II period, I hope my experiences will resonate with scholars interested in Southeast Asia's nearer past as well, not least as national archives house post-independence records and provide gateways into non-official collections. For comparative political scientists interested in multi-site archival research, this memo addresses practical issues of designing an itinerary and accessing records, as well as the more general challenges of managing abundance when using historical primary sources.

Background

While archival research is sometimes considered the domain of historians, there are many reasons for comparativists to explore historical primary sources. By historical primary sources, I refer to documents produced by first-hand witnesses or recorders of past events at the time, which include public and official records as well as private accounts and non-textual documents such as maps and photographs.[2] A paucity of secondary case studies and skepticism towards existing explanations for my research question were two reasons why I began to explore primary sources. I was puzzled about how opium, once a lucrative source of tax revenue for European powers in Southeast Asia, became banned in the early 20th century, as a more general question about colonial state formation concerning when states abandon opportunities for revenue collection. Opium taxes represented a well-known topic in Southeast Asia's history but without sustained inquiries into how they were administered and abolished, and I felt existing theories of global moral crusades were missing something about the particular British and French colonial experiences with prohibition. Archival research further became an approach well-suited for tracing micro-level processes of colonial administration, by examining what those involved in opium-related reforms claimed as their rationales.

Every archive is different, beginning with the basic task of entering a building and accessing documents. To briefly walk the reader through this experience, I will compare the British Library in London to the National Archives Department of Myanmar in Yangon. My first time at the British Library was in 2010 as a graduate student on a $3,000 budget for 9 weeks. Before arriving, I asked my dissertation chair for a letter of introduction (see Image One) and also emailed the Southeast Asia collections curator whose contact information I found on the British Library's website. I also made a wish-list of 15 documents by consluting the UK National Archives' integrated website (called Discovery, accessible at http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/), using basic keywords like "opium", "Burma", "drugs." I brought printed copies of all of these to the British Library, as well as a recent utility bill and credit card statement (to establish residence) and my passport (to establish identity) to obtain a Reader's Card. I used a serial number on the Reader's Card to order documents online, which were delivered to the Asian and African Studies reading room within 70 minutes. Currently, the British Library permits the use of digital photography (i.e., smart phones and scanner apps) and 10 is the maximum number of documents that one may consult in a day.

Accessing documents at the National Archives Department of Myanmar in Yangon differs in a few ways. First, during my recent visit in the summer of 2015, obtaining a Reader's Card required, in addition to my passport and letter of introduction, two recent photos (roughly 50 mm x 70 mm or passport size), a copy of my visa, and a 30 USD user fee as a foreigner.[3] Second, entering the archives was a more interactive process, beginning with a 10 minute chat about my paperwork with the gate-keeper, another half-hour conversation with the archive's director about my research, and then meeting the staff in the reading room. Third, instead of a public website, I used one of four terminals inside the reading room to

1. For a very helpful overview of the locations, institutional history, and general holdings of the national archives in these countries as well as Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand, see the "Archives in Southeast Asia" course wiki created by the University of British Columbia's School of Library, Archival and Information, accessible at http://wiki.ubc.ca/Course:ARST573/Archives_in_Southeast_Asia.

2. Distinctions between primary and secondary (or derived) sources vary by discipline. I have found Jill Lepore's *Encounters in the New World: A History in the Documents* (Oxford University Press, 2000) helpful in understanding the varied forms that primary sources take as documentary evidence.

3. I had heard that a letter of introduction from the U.S. Embassy in Yangon would also be necessary, which I did not find to be the case. Jonathan Saha's wonderful account of his experience in the Myanmar archives in 2012 mentions bringing a letter of support from a member of the Myanmar Historical Commission (MHC); his piece is accessible at http://imperialandglobal.exeter.ac.uk/2014/02/accessing-archives-in-myanmar-burma/. I entered the archives without this letter, although once in the reading room, I was asked to write a brief account of what my research was about, addressed to a member of the MHC.

search for documents, copied each call number by hand, and then gave the list to a staff member who either delivered physical copies of the document or pulled up digitized copies at the on-site terminal. I consulted between 5 and 20 documents per day, but this depended more on staff availability than official rules. Photographing documents is not allowed, but photocopying is available for 60 kyat per page for hardcopy prints and 125 kyat for a pdf on a CD (in 2015, the exchange rate was approximately 1 USD for 1,000-1,240 kyat, roughly 200 printed pages or 100 pdf pages.

Three Questions

Where to Start?

There are different advantages to starting in major archives (such as the British Library) versus relatively less travelled sites (like the Myanmar National Archives). In general, to borrow Aries Aruguay's distinction between "expansive sojourn" and "surgical strike" approaches to data collection (see previous essay), larger, better-known, and generously-funded archives tend to facilitate the former, while smaller archives are better visited when one has a specific aim in mind. However, for multi-site research, location, proximity to other archives, as well as the availability of research aids are additional factors to consider. In my case, costs of living and travel dictated my first trip. In retrospect, I wish I had better known the substantive trade-offs between starting in larger versus small archives, which for research on Southeast Asia entails a choice between starting in the former metropole versus colony, given the region's inheritance of a divided record-keeping system with Europe.

A benefit to starting in Britain (London) and France (Aix-en-Provence) is the availability of printed and online research guides and subject indices. Put simply, these are maps of the skeletal structure of a collection. Archives are not centralized repositories with rational filing arrangements, but "sites of experiences" as well as institutions with many sub-cultures.[4] Thus, a single archive may have many different catalogues, all with different time frames, degrees of granularity, and logics of organization. Major archives are easier to first visit because there are more available maps, which range from sweeping overviews (e.g., of how records on French overseas dependencies are catalogued), topic-specific compilations (e.g., of records relating to health and disease in Burma and India), as well as a series-specific listing of all titles with a keyword index.[5] The downside to over-relying on these research aids is a false sense of full coverage, which is misguiding as major archives are both constantly acquiring new materials and updating catalogues.

The appeal to starting in Southeast Asia lies in the many colonial government records that were not sent to Britain and France. Reasons vary, from bureaucratic procedure to politics, but with the common result that the former holds primary sources relatively less explored by researchers, including successfully suppressed internal reports, voluminous district and municipal-level records, and personal papers. Of course, hitherto unseen records should not be valued for novelty's sake, and original sources do not necessarily mean original arguments. In my case, the Vietnam National Archives held files on opium smugglers in the Hanoi court of appeals and private correspondence relating to financial scandals around opium revenue, documents that I did not know were missing from the records I had consulted in France. Original sources became valuable, however only after having an argument to revise or a narrative with a missing part. The downside to starting research in Southeast Asia is that pre-trip planning is more difficult, with fewer and less fine-grained research guides (notable exceptions are the National Archives of Singapore and Malaysia).

4. See Arlette Farge's 1989 *The Allure of the Archives* (Yale University Press, 2013) and the Council on Library and Information Sources Resources' May 2016 report, "Terra Cognita: Graduate Students in the Archives, a Retrospective on the CLIR Mellon Fellowships for Dissertation Research in Original Sources", accessible at http://www.clir.org/pubs/reports/pub170.

5. See Richard Axelby and Savithri Preetha Nair's *Science and the Changing Environment in India, 1780-1920: A Guide to the Sources in the India Office Records* (British Library, 2010). For Burma, an excellent introductory reference text is Andrew Griffin's *A Brief Guide to Sources for the Study of Burma in the India Office Records* (British Library, 1979). Within the India Office Records, Burma-related sources are located mainly in the P series (section 11, proceedings and consultations for 1864-1924) and the M series, which were records produced by the Burma Office from 1932-1948. At the reading room of the Myanmar National Archives, consult the Guide to the Archival Sources of the British Administration Period, 1826-1948, compiled by Khin Mar Mar. Students of British-ruled Malaya´s colonial era are fortunate in having Paul Kratoska's 12 volume *Index to British Colonial Office Files* (Arkib Negara Malaysia, 1990), which provides an exceptionally fine-grained catalogue for the CO 273 and CO 717 series that contain original correspondence regarding the Straits Settlements (1838-1946) and Federated Malay States (1920-1951). For French Indochina, an invaluable starting point for archival research is the *Guide de recherches sur le Vietnam* by Chantal Descours-Gatin and Hugues Villiers (L'Harmattan, 1983) and the *Guide des fonds d'archives d'époque coloniale conservées au Centre no.1 des Archives nationales à Hanoi* (NXB Khoa Hox Xa Hoi, 1995), compiled by Ngo Thieu Hieu. Mark Bradley's 1993 memo, "Vietnamese Archives and Scholarship on the Cold War Period" illuminates the politics that have shaped the current archives and is accessible at https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/ACFB79.pdf.

How to Manage Time Traveling Across Multiple Archives?

Again, every archive is different. There is anywhere between a 5-minute (Yangon in August 2015) and 2-week (Hanoi in June 2015) gap of time between submitting a request and when a document arrives in one's hands. Also, depending on a document's classification status and confidentiality, preservation status, and very existence, one may not see the document at all. Finally, there are always too many documents to consult and limited time. Given these challenges, I found three approaches to managing time and document abundance helpful.

One is to ask for help from the staff in the reading room. It would be a mistake to necessarily presume a huge veil of secrecy or stubborn bureaucracy behind the time gap between when a document is called and delivered. It's also a matter of the archive´s having an immense number of documents and limited staff. Or, as I learned after spending a week obsessing over a 1939 file on opium negotiations that was never delivered, sometimes requests fall through the cracks. This is not to say that controversial and sensitive documents do not exist or no special interests protect paper-trail pasts. Rather, my point is that there is always unpredictability to what documents we get to see when, and being able to differentiate between what is deliberately and inadvertently inaccessible is a good way to manage time.

The second is to keep a straightforward note-taking system. Mine had two components: (a) diary that listed the call number, title of every file I requested, the dates and location of request and access, as well as a short explanation of why I wanted it; and (b) a filing scheme for organizing my notes according to the archive's own file structure, which makes individual documents easily re-traceable and is especially helpful for citation during write-up. The diary helped me avoid requesting the same or similar documents at different sites, as well as prioritize documents to read or copy when in a time crunch. It also saved me from my own poor memory in Yangon, when I was handed a file from 1891 entitled "Discovery of 150 tolas of opium by a subdivision officer." I was puzzled why I would have called this particular file: subdivisional officers seized opium often and 150 tolas was not a very large seizure. My diary reminded me that in the catalogue, the file title had a typo and had promised a "discovery of 150 tales of opium", which I had hoped would include informant testimonies. I was able to skim quickly through that document and move on to the next 20 that awaited me.

The third is planning a "circle" itinerary. For instance, in 2015, I was dividing my time across three archives in Hanoi, Phnom Penh, and Yangon. I first spent a week at each archive, which was enough time to obtain access and submit a list of file requests. Then, I returned after two weeks to the first archive and read the documents I had been granted access to, submitted a second list, and hopped to the next archives where my documents were waiting for me. This type of circular itinerary is well-suited for Southeast Asia where costs of between-country travel are low and multiple-entry visas are easy to obtain (it is less appropriate for archives with digitized document-calling systems with limits on how long the archive will hold records for consultation). It makes for a bit of a hectic tour, but one that reduces "down-time" waiting for access.[6]

6. I am grateful to historian Claire Edington for recommending this approach.

Who Do I Talk to in the Archives?

Down-time however, is not dead-time. The cost to a circle itinerary and multi-site approaches more generally is that it reduces precious time actually spent in the reading room. Physical presence matters, not least because archival research, like any other type of field research, is a social endeavor. It is also an interpretive task because we are posing questions to subjects who do not give direct answers, often do not speak for themselves, and are difficult to locate in the first place.[7] In these regards, the staff and archivists represent key informants, intermediaries and interlocutors; down-time is one way to generate a sort of trust or street-credibility, in my case, as a foreigner inquiring into the records of another nation's past.

When I began, it was not very clear to me how to start conversations or what questions to ask. Indeed, I was a bit skeptical of spending much time talking to others with so many documents to consult and so little time to read and copy. Thus, initially, I had only technical requests for the staff—i.e., "how do I find X document?" or "could you please help me locate and copy record?"—and specific questions about my own research for the archivists—i.e., "I'm interested in changes in opium taxation policies and excise revenue collection between the 1870s to 1930s. Can you recommend sources to look at?" or "Why do you think the British banned opium?"

No matter how often I return to an archive (or visit a new one), limited down-time is stressful and it's easy to become an anti-social ghost in the reading room, obsessively trying to spend as much time as possible

7. On elusive answers, misguided questions, and recalcitrant documents in the historical record, see Marc Bloch's classic *The Historian´s Craft* (Vintage Books, 1953).

the documents. I have observed the opposite tendency as well, in one less than tactful scholar at the Myanmar archives who barged in, explained he was in a rush, and complained about having to take off his shoes, while asking for “all your papers on U Nu” (the first Prime Minister of Burma after decolonization).[8]

However, I have found it actually more efficient and less anxiety-inducing to set aside a few hours to put aside the paper and chat with the people at the archives: with the staff to introduce myself and explain why I’m there, and with the archivist to ask how s/he would go about finding the sort of information I sought. Conversation-opening questions have included: “I found this document about smugglers. Have you seen any similar ones?”; “Where would I find tax records relating to opium in this collection?”; or “Do you meet other people working on opium?” It is also worth being able to explain why I care about these topics, by having answers to questions such as “why are you writing a book on opium?” and “why are you interested in our country’s history?” For once again, and in conclusion, every archive is different. The institutional knowledge of their record-keepers allows an outsider to search for records in places that we may not know to ask. Being sociable is also a way of being courteous, and perhaps one way to acknowledge, as Alysson Oakley’s essay (preceding in this issue) reminds us, the issues of power and status at stake in doing research in Southeast Asia as a foreigner.

8. He was politely informed that he could come back another day and perhaps access would be granted. For the additional weeks that I was there, I did not see him again. And I doubt he ever got to see all the archive’s papers on U Nu. On the vexed privileges of access as a foreigner at the Myanmar archives, see Jonathan Saha’s blog entry above.