

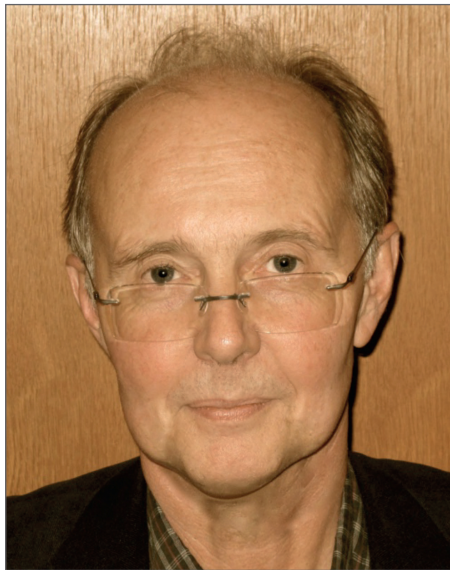
KARL HUSA: FROM THE AUSTRIAN BORDERLANDS TO THE THAI SEASIDE

Appreciation on the Occasion of his 70th Birthday

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It is not possible to do justice to an outstanding personality on just a few pages, an academic who shaped generations of students and worked on diverse fields in population and regional geography over decades, from the Austrian borderlands to the Thai seaside. Our perspective is necessarily selective and limited by our experience as (Diploma and PhD) students of Karl from 2000 to 2014, academic colleagues, and friends. We share a professional interest in Southeast Asia and human geography and have collaborated in teaching, organising fieldtrip excursions, research, and publishing.



Karl HUSA (Foto: Lukas C. HUSA 2015)

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Spending time with Karl, however, also means to joke, laugh, share stories, and to ponder the trials and tribulations of academic life. Thus, when we were asked to write an appraisal of Karl HUSA's achievements on his 70th birthday, we quickly agreed and felt deeply honoured.

Academic beginnings

Karl HUSA was born on January 6th, 1950 and grew up in Austria's capital city Vienna where he also graduated from high school in 1968. After high school, he joined the (then) compulsory Austrian Armed Forces where he also met Christian VIELHABER for the first time who later on happened to become a close fellow student, next-door colleague and friend at the Department of Geography and Regional Research at the University of Vienna. Following his military service, Karl studied Geography and English at the University of Vienna from 1969–1974. There, he quickly realised that he wants to pursue a life and career in academia rather than in high school. Colleagues of Karl (to whom he is also known as "Carlo") recall, that their study and work context at the University of Vienna then was characterised by collegiality, mutual support, and a mindset of "leaving no one behind", an atmosphere which seems to be increasingly missed in academia nowadays.

Initially, Karl's research focused on population geography and the theory, dynamics, and spatial patterns of internal migration. In 1983, he completed his doctoral thesis on internal migration, residential mobility, and suburbanisation processes in the Vienna Region and was promoted to university assistant at the then Department of Geography due to his excellent thesis. The research group of "Regional and General Geography" (*Länderkunde und Allgemeine Geographie*) at that time was led by Prof. Ernest TROGER, concentrating on demographic and socioeconomic processes in Europe, especially Austria as well as in North Africa and the Middle East. The research group, which also included Christian VIELHABER and Helmut WOHLSCHLÄGL, organised numerous scientific excursions and student field trips in Austria and abroad, including Germany, Switzerland, Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, Turkey, Iraq, and Iran. These excursions offered students and emerging scholars a unique sociocultural experience, opportunities to apply geographical theory in practice and to broaden their worldview.

Colleagues remember that Karl has always been passionate and curious about travelling and that he independently explored new routes and established professional networks before any of his colleagues and students had visited the area. For example, in 1977, Karl travelled with his yellow Toyota over land via Turkey through Iran to Iraq to prepare the upcoming field trip, a region which can hardly be visited today. In the following years, Karl further expanded his research interests towards international migration, sociodemographic transformation processes, and the intersections of tourism and migration, particularly in the context of Southeast Asia.

Research in Southeast Asia, especially Thailand

In the 1980s, Karl developed a research interest in Southeast Asia, in particular concerning the region's rapid socioeconomic transformations and the continuous and considerable rise in the level of spatial mobility and the increasing complexity of its forms and patterns. Parts of Asia indeed witnessed dynamic economic, demographic, and social change from the 1980s onwards. Economic interrelations between the more developed countries and the so-called Asian newly industrialised countries grew increasingly complex. A rapidly developing (mass) tourism drew more and more international visitors to the region.

In the context of such developments there was a growing demand for regional experts, for example as consultants on economics, politics, international development cooperation, tourism, or mass

media. As a result, the so-called “Southeast Asia Research Group” was established within the Department of Geography and Regional Research, originally consisting of Ernest TROGER, Karl HUSA, and Helmut WOHLISCHLÄGL. Karl has contributed significantly to this emerging research focus and the development of a future generation of human geographers with a passion for Asia. In his habilitation thesis which was based on field research in Thailand, national census data, and a series of surveys on migration into Bangkok Metropolis and vicinity, he contributed to models and concepts of spatial mobility in non-western contexts. After presenting his research monograph (habilitation thesis) on “Spatial Mobility in Third World Countries as a Complex Phenomenon: The Example of Thailand”, Karl achieved *Venia Docendi* (tenure) in Human Geography at the University of Vienna and was promoted to associate professor.

During the 1980s and 1990s, Karl collaborated with numerous Thai and international colleagues such as Hans-Detlev KAMMEIER, Ray ARCHER, and Nazrul ISLAM at the Asian Institute of Technology in Bangkok, Aphichat CHAMRATHRITIRONG at the Institute of Population and Social Studies at Mahidol University, or Wiwit SIRIPAK and Chinatana PEJARANONDA, both researchers at the Thai National Statistical Office. Further research, often together with his colleague Helmut WOHLISCHLÄGL, on Thailand and the region Southeast Asia during this time included, inter alia, demographic and socioeconomic changes among highland ethnic groups in northern Thailand, critical analyses of the Thai model of industrialisation, Bangkok’s urbanisation process, Thailand’s demographic transition from baby boom to grey boom, and examinations of the dynamics and spatial patterns of demographic change as well as labour migration in Southeast Asia.

To witness and experience Southeast Asia’s boom and bust firsthand in a relatively short period of time has left quite an impression on Karl. While such socioeconomic and demographic dynamics and the emerging research questions form one part of his fascination for Southeast Asia, he has also been attracted by the people he enjoys talking to, the foreign languages he studied, and the diversity of the region’s cultural and natural landscapes.

At the turn of the millennium Thailand has become one of the most important tourist destinations worldwide and a prominent “hotspot” of international retirement migration. In this context, Karl developed a research interest in mobilities connected to tourism, such as retirement migration and long-stay tourism, and guided various research and student projects on tourism in Southeast Asia. However, with the research topic of international retirement migration, Karl combined his rather new research area of tourism with his long-standing academic interests in migration and demographic change.

Several studies have been conducted under his guidance with colleague Christian VIELHABER and various postgraduate students, including Krisztina VERESS, Julia JÖSTL, Birgit WIESER, and Christina VOGLER. They analysed the motivations of elderly migrants to spend their “sunset year” abroad and their search for a “better life”, in a more pleasant environment, for less money, and often with a local partner, as well as the interactions between international retirement migration and the elderly care sector in Thailand. In addition, they tried to understand the differences within the retirement migrant communities, especially regarding socioeconomic status, type of migration, integration, and consumption patterns.

Karl’s interest in tourism is also shared among his family. His wife, Maria HUSA, worked many years in the travel and tourism industry and one of his two sons, Lukas C. HUSA, recently completed his PhD studies on the commodification of material culture in Thailand and continues to conduct research in Southeast Asia.

Karl’s work constitutes an important pillar of Southeast Asian Studies in the German speaking region and beyond. His co-edited books on socioeconomic and cultural transformations in Southeast Asia have become standard references for the region and have been introduced and critically dis-

cussed across Austrian and German Universities – not to forget his well-known co-edited readers on global population geography and on international migration.¹⁾

Along his research, Karl has continued to teach, particularly in the fields of population geography, migration studies, tourism and leisure research, development geography, and regional geography with a focus on Southeast Asia and the Middle East. Karl's interesting and entertaining lecture style, based on plentiful own experiences and research, made him one of the most popular teachers and supervisors at the department. His research and teaching outputs led to his promotion as Ao. Univ.-Professor at the Department of Geography and Regional Research, University of Vienna in 1996 and head of the Asia Research Group in 2002 which he continued until his retirement in 2016.

However, Karl remains a highly active member of academia, through continued teaching, research and administration both at the University of Vienna in Austria and at Universities in Thailand. Since 2016, he has been foreign expert on mobility-related research for Suan Dusit University, Hua Hin, Thailand, and recently was a visiting professor at the Research Institute for Language and Cultures of Asia (RILCA), Mahidol University, Thailand. With the latter, he most recently co-developed a collaborative project among Japanese, Austrian and Thai researchers, titled "Caring for the elderly abroad: Challenges and Opportunities of the transnational retirement industry in Thailand". Associate Professor and former director of RILCA, Kwanchit SASIWONGSAROJ who has been working with Karl on this project, recently stated in a personal communication about him (November 2020):

"We are so fortunate that he chooses to invest a part of his research career in this region. He is among the first to touch on the issue of intersections of tourism and migration in Thailand. His works contribute to the link of migration from Europe to Southeast Asia and ignited further research in this regard widely. I personally have had a great opportunity to work with him as a visiting researcher at University of Vienna on the issue of migrant worker management in terms of access to health services and integration to the host society."

Karl indeed has been crucial in establishing research contacts and network to Southeast Asian research institutions. Until the present day, he acts as Deputy ASEAN-UNINET representative of the University of Vienna whose mission is to foster joint projects with partner universities in Southeast Asia, to undertake education and training in a specific field of work, and to provide or support guest lectures, workshops, and excursions.

Excursions to Thailand

Karl organised and led student excursions to Thailand and other parts of Southeast Asia from 1983 to 2015. Both authors of this article joined an excursion to Thailand with Karl in 2005 which would completely change the course of our lives. In 2004 we decided to participate in an excursion abroad to Thailand on the topic of "mass tourism in Thailand's coastal areas" with Karl HUSA and Christian

¹⁾ Cf. i.a. HUSA K., TRUPP A., WOHLISCHLÄGL H. (eds.) (2014): Southeast Asian Mobility Transitions. Issues and Trends in Migration and Tourism. Vienna: Department of Geography and Regional Research. – FELDBAUER P., HUSA K., KORFF R. (eds.) (2003): Südostasien. Gesellschaften, Räume und Entwicklung im 20. Jahrhundert. Vienna: Promedia. – HUSA K., NISSEL H., WOHLISCHLÄGL H. (eds.) (2011): Südost- und Südasiens. Demographische, soziale und regionale Transformationen. Vienna: Department of Geography and Regional Research. – HUSA K., KORFF R., WOHLISCHLÄGL H. (eds.) (2018): Südostasien. Gesellschaften, Räume und Entwicklung. Wien: New Academic Press. – HUSA K., PARNREITER C., STACHER I. (eds.) (2000): Internationale Migration. Die globale Herausforderung des 21. Jahrhunderts. Frankfurt/Main: Brandes & Apsel. – HUSA K., PARNREITER C., WOHLISCHLÄGL H. (eds.) (2011): Weltbevölkerung: Zu viele, zu wenige, schlecht verteilt? Vienna: Promedia.

VIELHABER. For a long time, we had already planned to make a trip to Southeast Asia, since Alex had previously been fascinated by the region. It turned out to be a fateful trip. Only weeks before we were to depart, the 2004 (Boxing Day) Tsunami hit the region and devastated many coastal areas, also in Thailand, resulting in massive loss of human lives. For some time, it was unclear whether to cancel the trip or not. But in the end the group decided that it was important to support the hard-hit tourism industry of Thailand and the countless families who depended on it for a living.

Despite the devastation we experienced in some areas (such as Khao Lak and Phuket) it was surprising to see how quickly the incredibly resilient people of Thailand tried to return to “normal life” (an observation we would make again years later during other “crisis events” in Thailand). For us the excursion was an introduction to a country and a region which strongly affected and fascinated us. With much humour and expertise Karl and Christian provided the academic background to our field trip. Also, our local tour guide Tom (Thai native who had grown up in Switzerland) was a perfect “cultural broker” spending long hours with us during the nights discussing Thai culture and cross-cultural issues. Even some minor health issues (colds, infected legs, monkey bites, digestion troubles) could not deter us from exploring the country and its marvels.

Following the official end of the excursion we continued our stay in Thailand for some weeks to pursue our own (research) projects. Alexander ventured into Northern Thailand (Chiang Mai) where he began his first of many field studies on ethnic minorities in the tourism industry. Rainer stayed on for touristic purposes (scuba diving) but began to eventually develop an interest in the political situation of Southern Thailand. The result was further field trips to the region, our diploma theses, Alex’s PhD thesis and several other publications, which were greatly supported by Karl. Also, other students participating in this excursion got inspired and decided to continue their masters and PhD thesis on a Thailand-related topic under Karl’s supervision. Alex moreover had the pleasure of working together with Karl from 2010–2015 as University Assistant / Assistant Professor at the Department of Geography and Regional Research. They also currently work on a joint manuscript on the topic of intersections of tourism and migration in Thailand.

However, this excursion and our study experiences had a far greater impact on our careers and lives. Following his doctorate, Alex spent a year researching at Mahidol University, Thailand, and – after an intermezzo in the South Pacific – continued to live and work in and on the region. Rainer lived and worked in Thailand for over five years and continued his PhD studies on the region as well. Whenever we returned from Southeast Asia to Austria (even only for a short family visit) we felt an urge to visit our mentor “Carlo” for coffee, whom we regard even as part of our “extended family”.

It was therefore a particular honour, when we had the chance to continue the “tradition” of organising excursions to Thailand and other Southeast Asian countries including Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Vietnam as excursion leaders ourselves (Alex from 2011 to 2015, partly with Kosita BUTRATANA accompanying Karl and Christian; and in 2014/15 with Rainer by ourselves).

Karl the person and mentor

Karl’s remarkable *personality* stood out at the Department of Geography and Regional Research and the University of Vienna at large where he left a personal impact on every student he met. Reportedly few other staff at the Department of Geography enjoyed greater popularity than Karl, even following his official retirement. Scores of students chose him as supervisor for their first academic work, and for a good reason: It was known to all students that his door was always wide open and there was no need to wait for weeks to get an appointment. Despite his busy schedule, he managed to find time for his students and – as far as we remember – he responded quicker to email queries than any other staff member at the department.

Every concern which a student shared with him was taken seriously, although with his light-hearted, humorous manner even the gravest of worries almost disappeared after a brief consultation with “Carlo”. The barrier between “student” and the “teacher” which often felt so insurmountable with other professors seemed almost inexistent. Even personal issues that were not directly related to studies or academic issues could be deliberated with “Carlo”. Reportedly, even some colleagues consulted him as their “life coach”. We both remember the difficult time between completion of our Master theses and the start of a job or a research scholarship. We walked into his office in despair but walked out with a smile.

Yet we are only two examples of countless students who were encouraged by Karl to broaden their minds, look beyond Austria and Europe and venture into the unknown. Today some of his former students live and work across the globe in countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, China, Japan, Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Canada, Belgium, Germany and Switzerland, to mention just a few. Others remain connected to Southeast Asia from their Austrian home in many ways.

But Karl was not only a mentor for students and colleagues from Austria and Europe who were interested in regional Geography of Southeast Asia. He was also an important person for several foreign students and emerging scholars who dared to face the challenge of studying and researching in Austria or were interested to connect with academia in Europe. For many of them Karl was more than just their supervisor, he supported them in ways which went far beyond his academic responsibilities. At the same time, Karl supported students and colleagues in their scholarship endeavours and provided logistical and research support on spot in Austria. The research output of such mentoring and collaboration included a study of Thai marriage migrants and their socioeconomic mobilities in Austria, an analysis of Thailand’s demographic challenges in the 21st century, and a research of Asian travellers’ consumption patterns in Europe. Associate Prof. Huong T. BUI from Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University (APU) in Japan who was a visiting professor at the University of Vienna characterised Karl HUSA in the following way:

“ ‘Inspiration’ is the best word to describe how Professor Karl Husa has influenced my career development. [...] Karl’s passion and interest in Southeast Asia’s has inspired me to find the meaning of life and work, the way that I can contribute to my own country [Vietnam], my own region, and the way in which a native researcher from a developing country can voice up and make impact in academia.” (personal communication, November 2020).

Karl HUSA has made several important contributions towards the scholarship of population geography and migration studies, particularly in the context of Southeast Asia. Large parts of his work have been published in German language which somehow limited the perception at the international (and English-dominated) stage but simultaneously contributed to academic and popular discussions of Southeast Asia in the German speaking part of the world.

Karl HUSA has been a great mentor to numerous undergraduate and graduate students as well as to junior faculty and incoming students and visiting researchers. His excellent teaching in class, his research supervision as well as his outstanding personality and great sense of humour have made a big difference for us and many of his other students and colleagues.