

SPECIAL FEATURE



SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES: CRISIS OR OPPORTUNITY?

In recent years, the economic crisis caused by the Lehman shock resulted in funding cuts to area studies in various countries, notably America. This has led to a certain amount of nervousness and anxiety over the future of area studies. However, the situation in America stands in stark contrast to that in East Asia, which has seen governmental investment in promoting the institutionalization of Southeast Asian area studies from within the region. With ever increasing recognition of the role the region will play in the 21st century, recent academic expansion in the founding of centers specializing in Southeast Asia has grown apace in Singapore, Thailand, Japan, mainland China, and South Korea, in line with the deepening East Asian regional integration. This in itself is indicative that the study of Southeast Asia is being undertaken in multiple sites outside of the traditional American and European centers. It also points to a gradual shift towards the expansion of networks and deepening of institutional ties within, across and beyond the region. At the International Convention of Asian Scholars (ICAS) held in Macau, China between 24–27 June 2013, CSEAS sponsored a roundtable to discuss the future of Southeast Asian Studies and brought together leading Southeast Asianists based in Thailand, Singapore, Japan, South Korea and Europe in the interest of promoting multilateral dialogue about the direction, challenges and future of Southeast Asian area studies. This feature issue pools together the discussions which were shared between concerned scholars engaged in Southeast Asian Studies.

Special Feature: Southeast Asian Studies: Crisis or Opportunity?

Southeast Asian Studies: Toward an Open Regional Networking

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More than fifteen years ago, the distinguished scholar Ruth McVey, in her Frank Golay Memorial Lecture at Cornell University, noted that Southeast Asian studies in the United States of America were being marginalized at precisely the time when Southeast Asia was becoming increasingly globalized, and increasingly “real,” important, and relevant to Americans (McVey and Reynolds 1998, 37-38). In a time of budget cuts and pressure to demonstrate area studies’ relevance to other academic fields and to the state and the general public, McVey called for rethinking Southeast Asian studies. To quote McVey, “It is not that Southeast Asia is the object of our study, but that Southeast Asians are its subject” (ibid., 53). McVey was critical of the setup of Southeast Asian studies programs in America, in which programs competed for funds and prestige, and advocated greater cooperation instead, calling on Southeast Asianists to think “in terms of networks rather than of institutions, and these networks should in principle be global and not just regional or national” (ibid., 54).

Nowadays, McVey’s vision of networking among Southeast Asian studies institutions has been borne out, and, in fact, no longer limited to developed countries. Indeed, an important development of the past decades, particularly from the 1990s onwards, has been what some area studies scholars have called the “decentering” of Southeast Asian studies from their established bases in a few preeminent institutions in Western Europe and, in particular, the USA, Australia, and Japan toward multiple hubs spread out, and connected network-style, both globally and regionally. New centers—with Southeast Asian studies often included under Asia-Pacific or Asian studies—have been set up not only in Mainland China, South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong, but in Southeast Asia itself, starting in the 1970s and increasing in the 1990s in countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, and the Philippines. We are now seeing the fruits of this multi-sited growth, which has not only produced high-quality scholarship undertaken by Southeast Asian scholars based in the region, but also Southeast Asian scholars who are specializing on other Southeast Asian countries beyond their own home countries or diasporic communities.

Although Southeast Asian specialists have long been aware of the constructedness of “Southeast Asia” as a geopolitical, economic and multicultural system, as field of study and unit of analysis for asking questions and proposing methodologies, and as an institutional space, there is no doubt that the reality

of economic integration and increasing densities of flows and movements, exchanges and interactions of people, goods, ideas, and institutions within this so-called region have done much to strengthen regional awareness and identification, if not necessarily consciousness nor identity, among its people. Geographical proximity, however, is no guarantee that people of Southeast Asia know more, let alone ought to learn more, about each other than about, say, Britain or the US or Australia. And yet, Southeast Asian studies are becoming more globalized in the sense that there are greater possibilities not just for people but for knowledge itself to “travel” (as Carlo Bonura and Laurie Sears have pointed out [2007]). Moreover, historical and contemporary international migration has created substantial communities in America and Europe with biographical, symbolic, cultural, and material ties to Asia and Southeast Asia, resulting for example in a close but also fraught relationship between area studies and Asian-American studies in individual, institutional and conceptual terms. The recent book edited by Goh Beng-Lan, *Decentering and Diversifying Southeast Asian Studies: Perspectives from the Region*, called for nurturing forms of “thinking from and about Southeast Asia” (2011, 13) that can develop “theoretical perspectives which can consider the simultaneity and interaction of the global and local, the inside and outside, the old and new, the centre and the periphery, the stable and the unstable, and so on” (ibid., 9).

This idea of Southeast Asian studies that can be undertaken by both Southeast Asians themselves as well as committed scholars from other regions in expanding and deepening networks of peoples and institutions that link up and undertake activities at the local, national, regional and global levels has become a reality. With the establishment of an ASEAN community in 2015, and the critical role of ASEAN as hub of region-making in East Asia and Asia-Pacific, such institutional and individual networking initiatives and efforts are likely to increase rather than decrease. There is a need for us to consider more closely the region-based impetus for promoting studies of Southeast Asia and the perspectives arising from the region itself.

As we get better connected with each other, we find ourselves learning from each other, and confronting similar challenges under different circumstances. Funding is always a problem. Strengthening collaboration and exchange is another. Identifying local, national, regional and global agenda for Southeast Asian scholarship, located as it is now in multiple sites across a far wider geographical swath, is still another.

From the start, we accept the fact that although we may speak of common challenges and problems, we also speak from multiple locations, from specific histories, from heterogeneous cultures and societies, from different languages, and not always convergent priorities and agenda. For some scholars, particularly in America, the marginalization of Southeast Asian studies is a reality, while for others working, for example, in Japan and Korea and Southeast Asia itself, new opportunities for obtaining funding and institution-building—including funding directly connected to region-building—have arisen in connection with state priorities and private-sector investment in the region. While some scholars worry about Southeast Asian studies' contribution to universal knowledge, others seek better ways of engaging nationalist or what some call "nativist" scholarship. For some institutions, Asia-Pacific or Asian studies appears more institutionally viable as a geographical framework than Southeast Asian studies, while many Southeast Asian scholars are rooted in national or sub-regional studies and some lament the fact that they know more about the debates and concerns of "Western" scholarship than about the debates and concerns of their own neighbors. While some of us call for multidisciplinary and comparative approaches to the study of Southeast Asia, others strive to cross not only the disciplinary boundaries that separate the social sciences from the humanities, but also the disciplinary boundaries that separate the natural sciences from the human sciences. While some of us think of Southeast Asian studies in terms of its potential for promoting oppositional thinking and practice, others see the necessity of working with the state, for all its constraints and limitations.

How do we step-up our institutional and personal networking efforts to make Southeast Asian studies viable? How do we nurture cross-disciplinary and comparative perspectives in our respective "areas" of study in the process of learning from each other and learning from the rest of the world? How do we rethink national studies to make the nation more open and inclusive? What kind of cooperative, collaborative activities can we undertake at both individual and institutional levels? This special newsletter feature issue brings together a group of scholars who are representatives of their respective institutions to share their experiences and ideas about the state of Southeast Asian studies in their countries, the problems and challenges that area studies scholars as well as programs or institutions are confronting either by themselves or in common with other institutions, and the initiatives and prospects for further collaboration and cooperation among area studies specialists and institutions at the local, national, regional and global levels.

References

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