

**Southeast Asia: Past, Present and Future**  
**New Zealand Asia Institute (NZAI)**  
**Auckland, New Zealand**  
**1-3 February 2006**

**Southeast Asian Studies in Southeast Asia**  
**Agenda for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

**OOI Keat Gin**  
**School of Humanities**  
**Universiti Sains Malaysia**

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### **Preamble**

'Southeast Asian Studies' in contemporary Southeast Asia is assuming increasing importance in the region itself. Several institutions of higher learning in the region have study programs ranging from baccalaureate to doctorates. At the same time there are several centers with particular research interest in Southeast Asia as a region and/or focusing on certain geographical area. Notwithstanding these aforesaid developments, the current overall scenario of Southeast Asian Studies in Southeast Asia is not encouraging. Furthermore there is the inevitable soul-searching endeavor of the future direction of Southeast Asian Studies against the onslaught of globalization impacting adversely on the very existence and survival of 'Area Studies', a once important academic pursuit not too many decades ago.

The present essay will look back to reminisce of the early days of the beginnings of academic studies of Southeast Asia in the region. Fast forwarding the reel to the contemporary setting to allow a perusal of the various 'Southeast Asian Studies Programs' existing in Southeast Asian universities and institutions. Attention will also be given to the development of centers and institutions that have Southeast Asian Studies as their exclusive agenda and others with lesser particularistic focus. Discussion will turn to the concept of 'Southeast Asia' with priority given to the perception of the region's inhabitants. Two pertinent issues will be examined. Firstly the region's academic community is beset with the dilemma of focus torn between the 'national' priority and the 'regional' agenda. Secondly of equal importance or even more urgent is the challenges posed by the globalization

phenomenon on the future direction of Southeast Asian Studies in Southeast Asia itself. Some proposals will be tendered for deliberation.

### **Genesis of Southeast Asian Studies in Southeast Asia**

‘Southeast Asian Studies’ defined as the academic study of what is currently referred to as the region ‘Southeast Asia’ encompassing the modern nation-states of Myanmar (Burma prior to 1989), Thailand (Siam before 1938), Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, the Philippines, Indonesia and Timor Leste (East Timor). Southeast Asian Studies undertaken in Southeast Asia itself is comparatively young. We need to qualify two categories of Southeast Asian Studies in the region. Firstly there is Southeast Asian Studies offered as a discipline at the various tertiary institutions and universities in the region. The second category is the numerous centers, institutions and departments specifically established with the particular objective of promoting research of the region whether as a whole or directed at the different parts often along national-political lines.

In terms of Southeast Asian Studies as a tertiary course catering to undergraduate and graduate studies its roots could be traced to the establishment of the Institute of Asian Studies in 1955 at the University of the Philippines. Southeast Asian Studies then that primarily focus on the Philippines (Philippines Studies) was a part of the overall Asian studies program. Following reorganization and a name-change to the Asian Center in 1968, degrees were being offered where some students specialized in Philippine Studies. In 1961, although abortive, there were proposals for a School of Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Malaya, then at Singapore.<sup>1</sup> However it was only in 1976 that the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur initiated a degree program in Southeast Asian Studies.

There was a poverty of development in Southeast Asian Studies in the region during the 1980s. The 1990s witnessed some advancement at the baccalaureate and postgraduate level where programs were established in Universiti Sains Malaysia (Penang, Malaysia), National University of Singapore (Singapore), and Chulalongkorn University (Bangkok, Thailand).

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<sup>1</sup> The University of Malaya initially established in Singapore following the Carr-Saunders Commission (1947) had another campus in Kuala Lumpur in 1958 that housed the arts faculty. In 1959 the two campuses were granted individual autonomy. Finally in 1962, the formal split was formalized with the original name retained by the campus in Kuala Lumpur whilst the campus in Singapore adopted the name University of Singapore (in 1981 when the merger was effected with the Nanyang University, the National University of Singapore came into existence).

This trend continued into the 2000s in Thammasat University (Bangkok, Thailand), Vietnam and the Philippines.

The 1960s witnessed the establishment in 1968 of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) at Singapore with its main focus dedicated to the study of Southeast Asia. Other centers and institutions in the region that has Southeast Asia as their main or one of their research agenda include Institut Alam dan Tamadun Melayu (ATMA, Institute of the Malay World and Civilization), Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia; Institute of East Asian Studies (IEAS), Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Malaysia; Center for Khmer Studies (CKS), Cambodia; and SEAMEO-CHAT (Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Centre for History and Tradition), Myanmar.

Besides the aforesaid two categories of Southeast Asian studies there are the various academic-oriented journals dedicated to the region as a whole or to specifically one or several of the countries. Heading this list is the *Journal of Southeast Asian History* produced by the Department of History at the then University of Singapore. The inaugural issue of JSEAH appeared in 1960. A name change to *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* to widen its scope was effected in 1970. Thereafter other journals appeared: *Philippine Studies* (Ateneo de Manila University), *Kajian Malaysia* (Universiti Sains Malaysia), *Jebat* (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia), *Thammasat Review* and *Thai Kadi Journal* (Thammasat University), and *Anthropolgi Indonesia* (Universitas Indonesia). Academic publications emanating from state institutions also played their role in promoting scholarly work of the region such as the *Sarawak Museum Journal* and *Brunei Museum Journal*. Similarly there are the journals of learned societies like the *Journal of the Siam Society*, and the *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*.

### **Southeast Asian Studies Programs at Universities/Institutions in Southeast Asia**

Throughout the region most institutions of higher learning conduct courses on Southeast Asia within the department of History, Geography, Economics, Sociology, Anthropology, Archaeology, International Relations, Security (or Peace) Studies, Political Science, and others. For instance a department of History will have courses titled 'Prehistory of Southeast Asia', 'Early History of Insular Southeast Asia' whilst in Anthropology modules have themes such as 'Hunters and Gatherers of Southeast Asia', 'Ethnography of

Hill Minorities in Southeast Asia'. However there are only a handful of institutions and universities that offer degree programs in Southeast Asian Studies per se. In these centers the teaching of Southeast Asia adopts an interdisciplinary approach. The region is viewed as a singular geographical, spatial entity. Such degree programs are offered in Malaysia (2 universities), Singapore (1), Thailand (3), Vietnam (3), and the Philippines (1).

## Malaysia

### *Department of Southeast Asian Studies, University of Malaya*

Reputed as the earliest and noted for its interdisciplinary approach, the Department of Southeast Asian Studies at University of Malaya traced its roots to the early 1950s where the concept of having an academic center dedicated to the study of Southeast Asia as a region was first mooted. Needless to say it took another quarter of a century before the idea was formally concretized into reality. Spurred by the clarion call following the First Summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1975, one of the objectives identified was for “the promotion of Southeast Asian Studies”.<sup>2</sup> Within a year an academic program was put into action at University of Malaya.

A three-year undergraduate program was initiated in the academic session 1976/1977 that witnessed the first batch of students. The Office of the Dean, Faculty of Arts and Social Science took on the responsibility of managing the program. It was only in 1989 that the Department of Southeast Asian Studies was established. Besides a course in ASEAN Studies introduced in 1998 that has English as the medium of instruction, all other courses are conducted in *Bahasa Malaysia* (Malay language), Malaysia's national language. Throughout the duration of their degree program, students are required to pursue one of the Southeast Asian languages offered – Thai, Filipino (Tagalog), Burmese, Vietnamese, Khmer, Lao, and Javanese. As part of the program students accompanied by faculty members undertake study visits to the region. In their final year students undertake research and writing of a graduate exercise; initially this component was optional but became a mandatory requirement since 1993.

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<sup>2</sup> Declaration of ASEAN Concord D.3 Bali, 24 February 1976, Section D – Cultural and Information Clause 3 cited in Vejai Balasubramaniam, “Southeast Asian Studies in Malaysia” in *Southeast Asian Studies in Asia: An Assessment*. Edited by Milagros R. Espinas, Dean Armando S. Malay Jr., and Aileen S. P. Baviera (Quezon City, the Philippines: Asian Centre, University of the Philippines, [2003]), p. 30.

In tandem with the undergraduate program, postgraduate degrees (M.A., Ph.D) are conducted through supervised research work. Of the prominent areas of research interest, economic history and maritime issues are popular likewise topics relating to regional relations and political economy. All candidates are expected to be proficient in the language of the area of their research focus. If not, they are required to attend classes at the university's language center.

### ***School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia***

Conceptualized in the late 1990s the Southeast Asian Studies Program, an 18-week (one semester) program is offered as a 'Minor Package' for undergraduate students at the School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia. It relies heavily on the cooperation of three arts faculties, namely School of Social Sciences, School of Humanities, and the Arts Centre. Conducted in English as against Bahasa Malaysia, the medium of instruction on campus this program based on a theme-structured curriculum balances the cultural, historical and contemporary social issues that impacted on the socio-economic and political development of the region. The first intake was in the academic session 2000/2001. Both foreign students (the majority on exchange programs) and local students in pursuing this program will be exposed to the heterogeneous reality of Southeast Asia through courses covering history, culture and the arts, economics, politics, sociology and anthropology. Moreover there is a course titled 'Independent Studies/Directed Readings' whereby a student under the guidance of a faculty member as appointed supervisor embarked on research on a selected topic of interest or readings with the evaluation based on a semester-end assignment or bibliographical essay.

The Southeast Asian Studies Program is part of the university's wider mission of internationalization where amongst its decided aims is to encourage and develop intellectual and multicultural interaction between Malaysian and foreign students in a formal and structured teaching-learning setting.

### **Singapore**

***Southeast Asian Studies Program, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences,  
National University of Singapore***

A program leading to the baccalaureate degree of Southeast Asian Studies with an inaugural intake in the academic year of 1991/1992 was first raised in 1986. From the start a multidisciplinary scope of academic instruction was adopted with attention given to the socio-cultural and political-economic networks that existed and continue to function in contemporary Southeast Asia. The teaching staff was drawn from various departments within the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, namely Geography, History, Economics, Malay Studies, Political Science, and Sociology. A variety of topics are offered with the following as illustrative: 'International History of Southeast Asia', 'Minorities in Southeast Asia', 'Economy and Society in Southeast Asia', 'Peoples and Cultures of Southeast Asia', 'Criticism in Modern Malay Literature'. Proficiency in one of the indigenous languages of Southeast Asian is an important component of the study program. Hence included as language courses are *Bahasa Indonesia* (1992/1993), followed by Vietnamese (1995/1996), and Thai (1998/1999). Students of the 'Honours Class' are encouraged to undertake research in the region. Many theses that were produced reflected results of fieldwork, and also involved the use of indigenous language materials. Samples of theses are: "Nguoi Viet Goc Hoa: A Study of the Vietnamese Chinese in Ho Chi Minh City", "Wings of Change: Towards a Dynamic Airlines Industry in Southeast Asia", "Behind the Curtains: The Lives and Experiences of Transsexual Performers in Phuket", "The Imitation of Christ in Pampang: A Preliminary Look at Crucifixions in San Pedro Cutud", "Dancing for the *Nats*: Popular Drama and Religion in the Natkadaw Pwe of Upper Burma", "Sacred Steps: The *Nuuraa* as Magical Practitioner in the Kelantanese Thai Culture Region".

Postgraduate research degrees (M.A. and Ph.D), and the coursework degree (M.A. [Southeast Asian Studies]) received candidates from neighboring countries and beyond the region. The 'M.A. by coursework' was inaugurated in 1995 that catered to working adults and fresh graduates with or without previous exposure in undergraduate courses on Southeast Asia. It is envisaged that these mature students would benefit from a deeper and wider exposure to various theoretical perspectives and methodologies to better equip them to understand and explore contemporary world issues and life experiences in Southeast Asia. This postgraduate program drew candidates from professionals in public relations, marketing and management, education and research, and military personnel. The duration of this taught course is one year (two semesters) for full-time students and two years (four semesters) for part-time candidates. Examples of course modules, viz.

'Approaches to the Study of Southeast Asia', 'Comparative History of Southeast Asia', 'Economic Anthropology in Southeast Asia', 'Southeast Asian Cultural Landscapes', 'Country Studies – Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia', 'Issues in Conflict Management in Southeast Asia'.

Then in the 2004/2005 academic session a National University of Singapore (NUS) and The Australian National University (ANU) Joint Masters Degree in Southeast Asian Studies was launched. Specifically this unique arrangement is administered by the Southeast Asian Studies Program, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, NUS and the Faculty of Asian Studies, ANU. Completed in two semesters (one year), candidates will spend the first semester in NUS and the second in ANU. The latter include undertaking a research project deemed as a crucial component of the joint degree program.

The MA and PhD research degrees have attracted students from the region as well as from Australia, Europe and North America. Some examples of submitted full research Master's and doctoral theses are "Breaking the Immortalized Past: Anti-communist Discourse and Reconciliatory Politics in Post-Suharto Indonesia" (PhD), "Myanmar Buddhism of the Pagan Period (AD 1000 - 1300)" (PhD), "Socio-Cultural Aspects of the Mother-And Daughter-in-law Tension in the Southern Vietnamese Family" (MA), "Italy's Trade with Asean Country (with an Analysis of the Italian position in European Union's Trade with ASEAN)" (MA), "Market Networks and Coffee Production in the Pioneer Fronts: Agricultural Expansion and the Challenge of the Forest in Vietnam" (MA).

## **Thailand**

### ***Mahidol University International College***

The Bachelor of Arts in Social Science (Southeast Asian Studies) offered at Mahidol University International College (MUIC) was initiated in 1996. Utilizing English as the medium of instruction the Southeast Asian Studies Concentration offers a comprehensive introduction to Southeast Asia. Mandatory courses include the geography, history, religions, political systems, economics and gender relations of the region. Students are also given the opportunity to select from a wide range of electives that focus on specific topics and issues relating to the diverse societies of Southeast Asia, socio-cultural themes as well as on the various art forms as practiced in the region. Non-Thai students are encouraged to pursue an intensive, year-long

instruction in the Thai language as part of their degree. All candidates are required to undertake independent research leading to a dissertation in their chosen area of interest; this component enhances original and critical thinking.

The career prospects for graduates include international business, international and non-governmental organizations, journalism and the media, and higher education (both teaching and administration).

### *Faculty of Liberal Arts, Thammasat University*

The 'Bachelor of Arts (Southeast Asian Studies)' at Thammasat University, Bangkok is a four-year program that commenced in 2000 at the Faculty of Liberal Arts. The avowed aim is to produce a new wave of graduates who possess a wide understanding of the Southeast Asian region in terms of its politics, the varied administrative and governance systems, economics, historical development, art and culture, and indigenous languages. Thai is the medium of instruction and students are required to attain proficiency in at least one other indigenous Southeast Asian language (Lao, Malay, Khmer, Indonesian, Vietnamese, Filipino, and Burmese). Graduates from this multidisciplinary program not only gained academic knowledge of the region but also attained linguistic ability in one of the indigenous languages. Armed with these credentials the career prospects encompass the diplomatic service, regional and international organizations, and trading and commercial firms with foreign linkages.

Examples of required courses are 'Cultures and Societies in Southeast Asia', 'History of Southeast Asia to the Nineteenth Century', 'ASEAN in Regional and Global Context'. Elective courses offered include 'Human Rights in the Southeast Asian Context', 'Urbanization in Southeast Asia', 'The Politics of the Narcotics Trade in Southeast Asia', 'Southeast Asian Values and Worldview', 'Globalization and Local Identity in Southeast Asia', 'Vietnamese Communism', 'Buddhism and Animism in Burma', 'Islamic Tradition, Modernization and Race Relations in Malaysia'.

An important and integral part of Thammasat's Southeast Asian Studies Program is the study abroad component where students are given the opportunity to utilize their acquired language skills as well as to immerse themselves in the socio-cultural context and real-life environment in one of the chosen countries of the region.

## *Faculty of Arts and Institute of Asian Studies, Chulalongkorn University*

Initiated in 2002 the 'Master's (MA) in Southeast Asian Studies (International Program)' is a joint effort by the Faculty of Arts and Institute of Asian Studies. This 18-month (3- semesters), English-speaking issue-based, multidisciplinary program requires students to take courses (compulsory and electives), engaged in field trips (in Thailand and in the region) and produce a thesis on a topic of their choice. Courses offered are from the disciplines of history, arts and culture, economics and political science. 'Modern Southeast Asia: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Democratization', 'Southeast Asian Civilization', 'ASEAN in Regional and Global Context' are samples of courses that are featured in the program. In addition to a short field trip within Thailand the 'Traveling Classroom' component offers students hands-on experience of the society, culture, environment, and daily living in a Southeast Asian country. Moreover students are encouraged and expected to undertake fieldwork while researching for their thesis; consequently it allows exposure to the current situation.

This multidisciplinary program attracts a diverse student intake drawn from countries such as Ireland, Norway and Sweden, Canada and US, Japan, India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka as well as neighboring Laos, Cambodia, Myanmar, Vietnam and Singapore.

### **Viet Nam**

In the context of Viet Nam "Southeast Asian Studies is, to Viet Nam, a novel scientific discipline ... [and] instruction of Southeast Asian Studies is still a fledgling business ... and lacks experience".<sup>3</sup> Although the teaching of Southeast Asian Studies remained a "modest business", this discipline of study is presented in three forms. Southeast Asian Studies as a discipline in the faculty of Oriental Studies at two institutions, viz. Hanoi University of Social Sciences and Humanities and Ho Chi Minh City University of Social Sciences and Humanities. Secondly there is established a Faculty of Southeast Asian Studies at Ho Chi Minh City Open University. The third

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<sup>3</sup> Pham Duc Thanh, "Southeast Asian Studies in Viet Nam", in *Southeast Asian Studies in Asia: An Assessment*. Edited by Milagros R. Espinas, Dean Armando S. Malay Jr., and Aileen S. P. Baviera (Quezon City, the Philippines: Asian Centre, University of the Philippines, [2003]), p. 148.

form is that special topics on Southeast Asia are taught in several faculties in almost all universities throughout the country.

Primarily the objective in focusing on Southeast Asian Studies is the government's intention to train undergraduates to serve in research agencies, as teachers, in commercial and business offices, and in non-governmental organizations with relations with Southeast Asian nations. The contents of the Southeast Asian Studies undergraduate curriculum include geography and population, historical development, cultural heritage, socio-economic issues, political systems, and international relations. Typical themes of courses are as follows: 'Socio-Economic Issues in Southeast Asia', 'International Relations in Southeast Asia', 'History of Southeast Asia', 'The State and the Political System in Southeast Asian Countries'. Students are given training in foreign languages, namely English, Thai, and Malay. Selected students with above-average performance will be given the opportunity to undertake research of a specific theme for a thesis submission within a three-month period. In the pipeline there are plans to establish a center of Southeast Asian Studies for the postgraduate level including the doctorate.

### **Philippines**

In the Philippines a Master of Arts (MA) with a 'Major in Southeast Asian Studies' is offered at the Centro Escolar University. Notwithstanding the postgraduate level of the program apparently little emphasis is placed on the acquisition of indigenous languages of the region. Only the Malay language is offered. Although much scholarship have been undertaken at the Ateneo de Manila University particularly in the departments of History, Anthropology and Society, Economics, and Literature there is as yet no Southeast Asian Studies program available.

### **Brunei, Indonesia and Others**

To date, Brunei, Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar do not yet have institutions offering Southeast Asian Studies that lead to an undergraduate or postgraduate degree. The common practice is that Southeast Asian Studies is offered not as a single discipline but as part of the listed content of offered subjects. For instance, in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at University Brunei Darussalam various departments offered courses like 'English Language in Southeast Asia' (Department of English Language and

Applied Linguistics), 'Islam in Southeast Asia' and 'Southeast Asia from the Early Nineteenth Century' (Department of History), and 'Land, People and Economy of Southeast Asia' (Department of Geography).<sup>4</sup> Likewise in Indonesia undergraduate courses on Southeast Asia are taught with particular focus on the region's history, government and politics, ethnography, economy and development, Islam, and specific issues (for example, the legacy of religion in Southeast Asia, international political economy and development of Southeast Asia, etc.). A common scenario for the history of Southeast Asia is where the prehistory component is conducted by the Department of Archaeology whereas topics like the early modern history of Southeast Asia comes under a course available at the Department of History.

Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar do not have study programs focusing specifically on Southeast Asia. The teaching and learning of indigenous languages of the region other than the host's own language is conspicuously absent in Brunei, Indonesia, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar. Only in the last decade that Indonesian universities are beginning to take measures to introduce Southeast Asian languages other than *Bahasa Indonesia*. In fact of the many state-owned universities only Universitas Indonesia in Jakarta offers language courses like Thai and Vietnamese.

An Indonesian academic speaking of his country's situation but also reflective of the current trend in Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar summarizes the contemporary trend.

... since the beginning the academic community in Indonesia showed insufficient concern for promoting Southeast Asia in comparison to the greater interest in the subject among government bureaucrats. ... Most scholars ... did not appreciate the value of learning another language aside from English. They may specialize in Thai or Vietnamese politics and economy without the necessary grasp of the languages of Thailand or Vietnam.<sup>5</sup>

### **Country Studies Programs in Southeast Asia**

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<sup>4</sup> See Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, *Handbook: 2001/2002*, University Brunei Darussalam.

<sup>5</sup> Bambang Purwanto, "Southeast Asian Studies in Indonesia", in *Southeast Asian Studies in Asia: An Assessment*. Edited by Milagros R. Espinas, Dean Armando S. Malay Jr., and Aileen S. P. Baviera (Quezon City, the Philippines: Asian Centre, University of the Philippines, [2003]), p. 18, 19.

Focus on specific studies on particular countries is relatively well-entrenched as a discipline and as departments/faculties in universities throughout Southeast Asia. Efforts in establishing such centers and promoting country or ethnic specific studies is a postcolonial response where the indigenous scholarly community and governments intend to reclaim and to reassert their 'lost' identity consequent of the long period of colonial rule. Even in Thailand that famously escaped political and territorial colonialism strived to establish an identity of what it is be Thai, or possessing 'Thainess'.

When the Institute of Asian Studies (IAS) was established in 1955 at the College of Arts and Letters of the University of the Philippines, 'Philippines Studies' was the core of inquiry in the wider objective of providing a "common ground in which to bring together scholars and students in Asia ... for joint endeavors ... to preserve and advance their common cultural heritage".<sup>6</sup> The mission of IAS was "to bring the reality of Asia to the Philippines and the Philippines to the rest of Asia".<sup>7</sup> When IAS was reorganized and renamed the Asian Center (AC), Philippine Studies continued to be the mainstay discipline. Currently AC offers three graduate programs in Philippine Studies: two versions of 'Master of Arts in Philippine Studies' and a 'Doctor of Philosophy (Philippine Studies)'. Both MA programs are based on coursework. However, one program requires the additional submission of a thesis. The PhD program inaugurated in the academic session 1993/1994 is a tripartite-joint program of study between AC, the College of Social Sciences and Philosophy, and the College of Arts and Letters.

In an attractive manner the Faculty of Arts of Chulalongkorn University offers a 'Master of Arts (Thai Studies)' that utilized English as the medium of instruction thereby making it available and popular amongst foreign and Thai students. Begun in 1991 this graduate study program is based on coursework and a thesis that aims at offering an integrated knowledge of Thai society and cultural heritage, and of the historical and contemporary development of the Thai nation-state. Some of the required courses read as follows: 'Thai Buddhism', 'Modernization and Traditional Thai Society',

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<sup>6</sup> Asian Center Brochure 1968, p. 5. Cited in Carolyn I. Sobritchea, "Reflections on the Developments of Philippine Studies in the Philippines: The UP Asian Center Experience", in *Southeast Asian Studies in Asia: An Assessment*. Edited by Milagros R. Espinas, Dean Armando S. Malay Jr., and Aileen S. P. Baviera (Quezon City, the Philippines: Asian Centre, University of the Philippines, [2003]), p. 96.

<sup>7</sup> Asian Center Brochure 1968, p. 9. Ibid.

‘Contemporary Thailand’; elective courses include ‘Men and Women in Thai Society’, ‘Human Rights in Thai Tradition’, ‘Thai Intellectual History’, ‘Thailand and Neighboring Countries’.

According to Tran Bach Dang “Vietnamese Studies is a science studying a land and its people in its entire relationship with nature, history and society in all respects in order to discover and highlight features typically characteristic of Vietnam”.<sup>8</sup> Beginning from 1995 the Colleges of Social Sciences and Humanities in the two Vietnam National Universities in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City assumed responsibility for the teaching and research of Vietnamese Studies. To date the following are the main venues where Vietnamese Studies are concentrated: Center for Research on Vietnam and Cultural Interchange,<sup>9</sup> Vietnam National University, Hanoi; Faculty of Vietnamese Language and Culture for Foreigners, College of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi; Faculty of Vietnamese Studies and Vietnamese Language for Foreigners, College of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Ho Chi Minh City.

A Department of Malay Studies at University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur offers a degree program at both undergraduate and graduate level. The primary focus is on the Malays of the Malay Peninsula (present day West Malaysia). Equal attention is given to the ‘Malay World’ that encompassed contemporary Malaysia, the southern provinces of Thailand, Indonesia, and the southern parts of the Philippines (Mindanao, Sulu). Core courses feature the history, language, literature, socio-cultural heritage, and Islam. ‘Malay Studies’ as a postgraduate degree program is offered at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia’s Institut Alam dan Tamadun Melayu (ATMA, Institute of the Malay World and Civilization).<sup>10</sup>

There is yet the availability of an integrated Indonesian Studies program in the centers of higher learning throughout the Indonesian archipelago. Although there are a multitude of courses on Indonesia offered at tertiary

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<sup>8</sup> Speech at First International Conference on Vietnamese Studies, Hanoi, Vietnam, July 1998. Quoted by Nguyen Quang Ngoc, “A Glimpse of Vietnamese Studies: Research and Teaching in Vietnam”, in *Southeast Asian Studies in Asia: An Assessment*. Edited by Milagros R. Espinas, Dean Armando S. Malay Jr., and Aileen S. P. Baviera (Quezon City, the Philippines: Asian Centre, University of the Philippines, [2003]), p. 102.

<sup>9</sup> Plans are underway to upgrade the Center for Research on Vietnam and Cultural Interchange to become the Vietnam Research and Development Institute. See Nguyen, “A Glimpse of Vietnamese Studies”, p. 107.

<sup>10</sup> See below.

level, such courses are offered and implemented by different academic programs that have scarce contact or coordination with one another. Typical of the overall situation is illustrated by the courses on Indonesia for undergraduates at Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, viz. 'Indonesian Social System' (Sociology Studies Program), 'History of Indonesia' (History Studies Program), 'Ethnography of Various Ethnic communities in Indonesia' (Anthropology Studies Program). At the graduate level, a similar situation is replicated. Consequently such developments dismiss any hope for the creation of an integrated curriculum for an Indonesian Studies program.

### **Research Centers and Institutions of Southeast Asian Studies in Southeast Asia**

Since the mid-1950s several centers and institutions were established in Southeast Asia some within universities whilst others as independent entities to some extent share the common objective of undertaking research of the region as a whole or its constituent parts. The spatial distribution of these centers are uneven with some countries having two or more whereas none in others.

The Asian Center of the University of Philippines dates its establishment to 1955 when the Institute of Asian Studies was inaugurated. Although the Asian Center's Southeast Asian research component is basically on the Philippines (Philippine Studies), it was one of the first measures in integrating a part of the region to the wider Asian context. The Asian Center continues to focus on its Philippine Studies degree program while at the same time contributing to research in the aforesaid area of specialization.

Established in Singapore in 1968 the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) is dedicated to research of the region with particular attention to issues related to stability and security, economic trends and developments, political, social and cultural change and transformation. Research undertaken at ISEAS is not primarily for scholastic pursuit but more importantly to make available findings that could raise public awareness of issues of concern as well as offer viable panacea to the many varied challenges and salient problems besetting the region. Some of the on-going programs of ISEAS include 'Regional Economic Studies (RES) Program', 'Regional Strategic and Political Studies Program', 'ASEAN-China Program', 'Malaysia Study Program'. Besides organizing lectures, seminars,

workshops, and conferences, ISEAS publishes research journals and book series.

Conceptualized in May 1994 in Kuala Lumpur the Southeast Asia Studies Regional Exchange Program (SEASREP) sought “to design a development plan *for* Southeast Asian studies *in* Southeast Asia *by* Southeast Asians”.<sup>11</sup> The SEASREP Council, the main operating body promotes Southeast Asian studies through study, research and exchange grants, and the establishment of a network of Southeast Asian scholars in the region through universities and other institutions and agencies. With the financial support from the Toyota Foundation and the Japan Foundation Asia Center, SEASREP conducts four grant programs towards achieving its goals: language training; The Luisa Mallari Fellowships for M.A. / Ph.D. Research in Southeast Asian Studies; visiting professors; and regional collaboration grant. All four programs are primarily aimed at supporting scholars of the region in the fields of the humanities and social sciences. Through its programs SEASREP offers opportunities in training and interaction for Southeast Asian scholars. Lending support to its networking web is the publication of the bi-annual *Southeast Asia Studies (SEAS) Bulletin* (1996) that features current and forthcoming developments such as academic programs, research projects, conferences, publications, and other related academic activities.

The SEASREP Foundation that hosts the SEASREP Council is headquartered in Quezon City, the Philippines whilst its joint secretariat is based in Tokyo, Japan.

Based at the Bangi campus of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Institut Alam dan Tamadun Melayu (ATMA) or Institute of the Malay World and Civilization is the only academic research center in Malaysia that focuses solely on the study of the ‘Malay World’, namely denoting most of insular Southeast Asia. Its academic activities are organized according to disciplines (history, economics, sociology, etc.), themes (gender studies, race relations, development studies, etc.), and ‘area studies’ (Malay studies, Chinese Studies, European Studies, etc.). Not only do ATMA expand time and energy catering to research (post-doctorate, etc.) and postgraduate (MA, PhD) studies, it is also dedicated to documentation and publication. ATMA concentrates on five major areas of research, viz. theory constructions,

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<sup>11</sup> Southeast Asia Studies Regional Exchange Program (SEASREP) website [www.seasrepcouncil.org](http://www.seasrepcouncil.org)  
Emphasis in original.

language, literature, culture, and education. Samples of on-going research are: 'Mathematics in the Life of Malay People', Malay Family Values', 'Language in West Borneo', 'Health and Medicine'. Another activity is 'skill development', namely in promoting Malay language courses (beginners and advanced learners) primarily to facilitate postgraduate students and researchers intending to undertake research and field work in the Malay World.

"Stretching from China in the north to Indonesia in the south, Japan in the east, to Burma/Myanmar in the west" is the definition of East Asia according to the Institute of East Asian Studies (IEAS) at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak.<sup>12</sup> Housed in the university's Kota Samarahan campus, IEAS was established in the late 1990s with the aim of advancing a greater understanding of the East Asian region. Its definition of East Asia notwithstanding, IEAS seemed to have a primary focus on the island of Borneo. For instance adopting an interdisciplinary approach to research, IEAS has created clusters around two major chairs, namely Nusantara Chair and Dayak Chair. Both clusters appear to give priority to Borneo and its multiethnic, multicultural inhabitants. A Chair of Sino-Bornean Studies is currently being set up.

Founded in 1999 the Center for Khmer Studies (CKS) devotes its major activities to the study, teaching and research on the civilization of the Khmer and the various cultures of the Mekong region. Established as an international, non-governmental and non-profit organization, CKS has the following objectives to realize in concrete terms: "To facilitate research and international scholarly exchange through programs that increase understanding of Cambodia and its region; to help strengthen Cambodia's cultural and academic structures and to integrate Cambodian scholars in the regional and international community; and to promote a vigorous Cambodian civil society".<sup>13</sup> Based at Siem Reap with the famed Angkor Wat as the backdrop and a branch at Phnom Penh, CKS has offices in New York and Paris. Although primarily concern with Cambodia, CKS nonetheless contribute to Southeast Asian studies by generating interests of the region through its vast network of institutional consortium members (Southeast Asia, US, Europe). Examples of CKS activities and research programs

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<sup>12</sup> IEAS website at [www.unimas.my/research/ieas](http://www.unimas.my/research/ieas)

<sup>13</sup> CKS website at [www.khmerstudies.org](http://www.khmerstudies.org)

include 'Pre-Angkorean Archaeology', 'Vernacular Architecture', and 'Cultural Resource Management'.

With a catchy acronym SEAMEO-CHAT representing Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Centre for History and Tradition based at Yangon, Myanmar was inaugurated in 2000 with the mission, "To promote cooperation in the study of history and tradition among Southeast Asian countries, and develop a greater regional identity through research, human resource development, education and linkages".<sup>14</sup> Specifically the activities of SEAMEO-CHAT is directed towards educational development in terms of curricula, linkages and networks among institutions and agencies throughout Southeast Asia, and the establishment of a resource center and databases. Some of its past activities include lectures on the following themes 'Exploring Traditions: Traditions of Kayin Spirit World', 'Between India and Southeast Asia: Art and Architecture of Rakhine', 'The Cities of Angkor: Past and Present'; seminars titled 'From Fact to Fiction: Image of Bayinnaung in Myanmar-Thai Historical Context', 'Ceramic Traditions in Myanmar'; and workshops such as 'History Agenda 21' and 'Cultural Classics of Southeast Asia'. Current projects include 'Southeast Asian History for Secondary Education' (Curriculum Project), 'Myanmar History from Myanmar Perspective' (Study Program), 'Legal Traditions of Southeast Asia' (Research Project).

In line with one of the strategic initiatives of the National University of Singapore the Asia Research Institute (ARI) was established in mid-2001. Primarily focused on the social sciences ARI engaged in interdisciplinary as well as intra-disciplinary research. Currently there are five research clusters: 'The Changing Family in Asia', 'Asian Migration', 'Cultural Studies in Asia', 'Religion and Globalization in Asian Contexts', and 'Southeast Asia-China Interactions'. As the last named cluster indicate ARI offers attention to the Southeast Asian region but in the context of relations with other parts of the Asian continent. ARI accommodates doctoral and postdoctoral research and visiting scholars and at the same time organizes conferences, workshops, study groups, and lectures. It also reached out to collaborate with other research centers and institutions worldwide. Moreover it ties up with academic publishers to disseminate research findings undertaken at ARI.

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<sup>14</sup> SEAMEO-CHAT website at [www.seameochat.org](http://www.seameochat.org)

Launched in July 2004 the Asia-Pacific Research Unit (APRU) of the School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia aims at promoting research of the Asia-Pacific region defined to include East, South and Southeast Asia, Australasia, Southwest Pacific, and the countries bordering the western coast of North and South America. The disciplines of interests include History, Politics, Languages, Literature, Philosophy, Religions, Environment, Ethnology, Anthropology, Geography, Culture, Heritage, War and Conflict Resolution, and the Arts. APRU intends to internationalize the research undertaken in Universiti Sains Malaysia to a worldwide academic audience a mission in tandem with the university's internationalization thrust. Amongst its activities are establishing joint research clusters with foreign institutions (Chulalongkorn University, University of Wollongong, etc.), organizes conferences, seminars and workshops, and having tie-up with academic publishers for a publication series. The *International Journal of Asia-Pacific Studies* (IJAPS), a refereed, multidisciplinary electronic journal published under the auspices of APRU will serve as one of the vehicles to facilitate the dissemination of research findings. Although not exclusively focus on Southeast Asia, APRU's activities will undoubtedly promote intellectual discourse and research of the Southeast Asian region.

### **The Concept of 'Southeast Asia': Perspective from Within**

The idea of 'Southeast Asia' was a foreign imposed concept. Terms like 'Further India', 'Greater India', 'East Indies', 'L'Inde Exterieur', or 'Hinterindien' implied that Southeast Asia was an eastern periphery of the Indian subcontinent. Likewise 'Far Eastern Tropics' meant that the region was a southern tropical extension of China. 'Indochina' denotes a region possessing a mixed of Indian and Chinese cultural elements. From the Chinese emerged the term *Nanyang* or 'South Seas' indicating the region to the south of the Chinese mainland. But it is to the Japanese imperialists that shortly following the end of World War I (1914-1918) viewed the region called *Tōnan Ajia* ('Southeast Asia') as a collective whole of the territories south and east of China that presented both economic and, strategic and military significance.<sup>15</sup> Although not in common usage then, German-speaking scholars at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were utilizing the term *Südostasien* in reference to Southeast Asia where they discerned broad

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<sup>15</sup> See Shimizu Hajime, "Southeast Asia as a Regional Concept in Modern Japan", in *Locating Southeast Asia: Geographies of Knowledge and Politics of Space*. Edited by Paul H. Kratoska, Remco Raben and Henk Schulte Nordholt. (Singapore: Singapore University Press; Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2005), pp. 82-112.

cultural similarities.<sup>16</sup> Finally the official christening of the term 'Southeast Asia' was during the Pacific War (1941-1945) that designated the area of operation for Anglo-American forces under Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten's (1900-1979) South-East Asia Command (SEAC). Whilst American General Douglas MacArthur (1880-1964) focused on fulfilling his promise of re-taking the Philippines, the re-occupation of the rest of the region was entrusted to the British and their Australian and New Zealand partners hence the creation of SEAC based in Ceylon (Sri Lanka). The term stuck and continued to be used in the postwar period.

Prior to the emergence of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967 and its subsequent expansion (1984, 1996, 1997 and 1998) that today encompassed all ten countries of the region that is commonly referred to as 'Southeast Asia', inhabitants of the various nation-states have scarce identification of themselves of belonging to a regional entity. Even nurturing a national identity within each post-independent nation-state itself is an uphill struggle where pluralism and communalism reigned strong. Thailand, with its homogenous population still has to contend with ethnic minorities in the hilly areas, immigrant Chinese, and indigenous Malay Muslims in the southern provinces. Even more perplexing is the question of identity confronting the myriad diversity that permeates the vast Indonesian archipelago.

In the contemporary context, however with the towering influence of ASEAN, to a certain extent the multicultural, multiethnic and multi-religious population of the region possesses some semblance of a regional identity and a sense of belonging. Notwithstanding ASEAN's promotion of the grouping as a 'family', the independent and nationalistic outlook of each of the ten nation-states is fiercely upheld and staunchly protected. Against the backdrop of cultural, geographical and political diversity there is a shared feeling amongst policy makers and power brokers that 'we-are-in-the-same-boat'. But this 'feeling' is only a flicker, a fleeting sensation that has yet to permeate a significant number of people from elite to the grassroots to make it useful and relevant in the formulation of a Southeast Asian identity. Parochialism remained strong along political boundaries that defy logic and the natural environment but nevertheless put in place as history dictates.

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<sup>16</sup> See Anthony Reid, "A Saucer Model of Southeast Asian Identity", *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* ("Special Focus: Reconceptualizing Southeast Asia." Edited by Amitav Acharya and Ananda Rajah), 27 (1999): 7-23.

As have been shown there are only a handful of institutions and universities in the region that seriously consider the promotion of a Southeast Asian Studies program. Although Country Studies programs undeniably contribute to the wider Southeast Asian Studies program, it is apparent that the 'national' agenda takes precedence over 'regional' concern. Illustrative of this trend is the following conclusion presented by participants in a conference-workshop that aimed at evaluating the state of contemporary teaching and research on Southeast Asia in Asia.

The state of the field, especially in Southeast Asian universities, is still very backward in general. While there are SEA-related courses taught in different departments and faculties and at different levels, these are quite few and formal. Moreover, many so-called Southeast Asianists in the region [Southeast Asia] have little claim to expertise on any country in the region other than their own.<sup>17</sup>

Unless the peoples in Southeast Asia itself begin to accept the identity of a 'Southeast Asian' not unlike the notion of a 'European', there is little prospect and headway for the advancement of Southeast Asian Studies in the region itself. Scholars and researchers from outside the region, as in the past will continue to dominate the teaching, learning, and research of Southeast Asia. Southeast Asians themselves will again, as in the past will be the passive recipients of knowledge and information of their region and of themselves from the voices and writings of non-Southeast Asians.

### **'National' versus 'Regional': Conflicting Agendas**

Throughout the colonial period the peoples of Southeast Asia were struggling to shake off the yoke of foreign domination. Following independence leaders of the new nation-states emphasized with earnest the twin goals of nation building and national socio-economic development. Integral in the pursuit of nation building is the projection of a national identity. The numerically dominant imposed their identity to be adopted as the national identity. Immigrants and indigenous minorities find themselves neglected in the national agenda. Governments of the nation-states utilized national histories to explain and justify their existence; similarly the

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<sup>17</sup> Milagros R. Espinas, Dean Armando S. Malay Jr., and Aileen S. P. Baviera (eds.) *Southeast Asian Studies in Asia: An Assessment* (Quezon City, the Philippines: Asian Centre, University of the Philippines, [2003]), n.p.

dominant majority transformed the national identity (based on their formulation) to legitimize their dominance in all spheres from political power to socio-cultural elements. Despite a semblance of democratic governance in most of the nation-states in the region, it can not be denied that the top-down structure of power and government is predominant. Hence it is to the vested interest of the ruling elite that hailed from the dominant majority community to continue to emphasize, support, and fund 'national' as against 'regional' studies at institutions of higher learning.

Furthermore in Southeast Asia public universities outnumbered private colleges and consequently the scholarly community is dominated by the 'pro-government' faction. The majority of academics who teach and undertake research are greatly dependent on the state that ensured his salary and continued employment and also holds the purse string to grants and research funding. It is therefore not surprising that university lecturers and professors tended to be inward-looking in their research activities; that is they focus on issues and themes of national concern over regional or other interest. Embarking on the national bandwagon is convenient (access to funding) and at the same time profitable (promotions in the academic hierarchy).

Unless governments of nation-states in Southeast Asia could realize apparent advantages to look beyond their shores – ASEAN is a good step forward in this direction – Southeast Asian Studies will not have a promising future. The current myopic, insular mentality will continue to reign with each nation-state concentrating on its own history, culture, language, literature, etc.

But even before the majority of scholars in Southeast Asia could wholeheartedly embraced Southeast Asian Studies the future of the discipline of 'Area Studies' is increasingly rendered obsolete and irrelevant with the onslaught of the globalization juggernaut.

### **Globalization and the Future of Southeast Asian Studies in Southeast Asia**

Towards the close of the 20<sup>th</sup> century two developments rendered the Area Studies approach unfashionable and heavily criticized. By the mid-1990s even Brunei that prolonged British colonial rule to 1984 was on its own for a decade whilst the post-independence period of other Southeast Asian nation-

states were two or more decades old. The engagement to create a national identity, a crucial ingredient of the nation building process has to a certain extent gained credence and acceptance albeit minor cosmetics. Attention then of political leaders and governments have shifted to economic growth and its sustainability, the latter a perplexing challenge where any hiccups posed a direct threat to political power and control. The second development was the demise of communism. The downfall of the Soviet Union in 1991 ushered in a bloc-less world order where the old divisions of the Cold War dissipated. In this new era of globalization, a term that has gained tremendous currency in the past decade a world-view perspective is more relevant than the narrow approach of Area Studies. The study of the interconnectedness of regions through transnational flows of labor, goods, capital and finance, peoples, etc. has become the major preoccupation amongst the academic community. What then is the prospect of Southeast Asian Studies in Southeast Asia?

The potential and future of Southeast Asian Studies in Southeast Asia itself is huge. The prospects will only be bright if several prerequisites are in place. The peoples and nation-states of Southeast Asia must regard and identify themselves as 'Southeast Asians'. In doing so they have adopted the united stance of Southeast Asia as a singular entity vis-à-vis other cohesive and less cohesive groupings in the contemporary world, viz. the European Community (EC), Africa, South Asia, East Asia, Australasia, Oceania, North America, Central and Latin America.

But before 'Southeast Asians' could be 'Southeast Asians' they need to get to know one another as well as the interrelationships and ties between each other. What better way to realize this 'getting-to-know-you' amongst the nation-states of Southeast Asia is through the promotion of Southeast Asian Studies, an academic exploration of uncovering the ties that bind, the differences that separate, the logic and basis of cooperation, and the fostering of a united collectivity to together face the challenges from without.

ASEAN in its close to four decades of existence has fostered unity amongst member-states to some extent but is deemed 'too-little'. But it is still not 'too-late' for ASEAN to initiate the much needed transformation to engender greater coherence in the grouping hence facilitating a readiness to meet the opportunities and confront threats brought about by globalization. Internally through Southeast Asian Studies programs of research ASEAN could identify the region's strengths as well as its weaknesses and take

prudent measures to enhance the former and overcome or reduce the latter. Already in place and entrenched ASEAN offers the best vehicle to promote Southeast Asian Studies in all member-states.

Furthermore the home-grown program of Southeast Asian Studies as shown in the examples in Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore will be replicated in other institutions in the region. And with greater participation and contribution from local-born scholars of the region, it will be a step forward to reclaim scholarship of Southeast Asia that has long been dominated by non-Southeast Asians.

### **Concluding Remarks**

... academics in the region [Southeast Asia] are now ready to study and provide knowledge about the region themselves. The Twenty First Century will be a century of Southeast Asian Studies by Southeast Asians.<sup>18</sup>

Southeast Asian scholars should move beyond their parochial and nationalistic mentality to foster greater affinity and cooperation amongst their fellow colleagues in the region. The pioneering endeavors of institutes and universities in Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore that have achieved strides Southeast Asian Studies need to be replicated across the region. The ball, so to speak, is in the court of Southeast Asian scholars and it is in their hands lie the future direction of Southeast Asian Studies. If they collectively take up the challenge together they will contribute to enrich ASEAN with knowledge of the region and beyond to meet the challenges in the age of globalization.

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