

## **Southeast Asian Studies in Transition**

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Southeast Asian Studies (SEAS) is a creation of western academic institutions in the ambivalent context of decolonizing, yet nevertheless proto-imperial, cold war politics. Reflecting as a number of essays in this volume show a post 1945 US approach to modernization and comparative politics, these early studies also sought to document local political oppression. This political dualism in the western academy is now being re-created, with distinctive Asian characteristics in Southeast Asia where the rapid proliferation of university-based programs devoted to the study of both Southeast Asia and the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) region has caused a degree of disciplinary uncertainty. Coterminous with this regional development there is also evidence that the rise of Southeast Asian Studies in Southeast Asia is taking place at a time when Southeast Asian Studies in the U.S., Europe and Australia is in relative decline.

Southeast Asian Studies and the areas studies disciplinary mix that informs it thus stand at something of a crossroads. On one side of the road are the more traditional, detailed ethnographic studies of distinctive local practices based on extensive fieldwork. On the other, there is a linking of the region to broader disciplinary concerns in the social and historical sciences and a rapidly changing global economy. Sometimes the two sides of the road can usefully converge to produce a new insight into local, national and regional processes and practices.

At other times, a new methodology generated in a very different academic and socio-political environment and applied uncritically to a Southeast Asian context can obscure and even contribute to a collective misreading of distinctive social and political practices. This is most evidently the case when historical methodological frameworks of a European, North American or generically western provenance are superimposed upon understandings and practices that have emerged under political and historical circumstances that are locally and regionally contingent. It

is in this context that the University of Malaya and Ohio University held a workshop in July of 2009 on *The Future of Southeast Asian Studies* dedicated to exploring its potential pathways.

As the social sciences developed methodological frameworks of universal application that were linked to the project of modernity, they inexorably facilitated a process that dissected traditional practices in order both to understand them but also to reform or render them malleable to the requirements of ‘progress.’ In the Southeast Asian context, the social sciences necessarily sought to understand the region through a reductionist lens that ultimately ranked it according to purportedly universal economic, legal and political standards. Consequently, at various times in the evolution of the study of the region, Southeast Asia’s apparent failure to modernize or develop reflected the drag of traditional practices, what the second editor of *The Economist*, Walter Bagehot, termed in 1874 the ‘cake of custom’. Subsequently, the classic works in social science whether from a Weberian, liberal, Marxist or neo Marxist perspective attributed Southeast Asia’s historic political weakness either to cultural factors that failed to generate a modernizing ethic, or as a function of institutional calcification the inability of potentially rich despotisms, or later, weak states, to generate the flexibility and dynamism required by modern market capitalism.

This approach, which broadly coincided with the emergence of the discipline of comparative politics and area studies on US campuses, thus carried with it an implicit modernizing bias. As the essays by Elizabeth Collins and Patrick Jory in this volume argue this perspective can both inform and distort regional self understanding This bias, informed, and continues to inform studies of the region as both local scholars and indigenous political elites received their higher education on US campuses through Title VI centers and to a lesser extent in more parsimoniously funded UK or Australian universities.

Moreover, this state of affairs did not change much with the end of the Cold War, the globalization of the market that incorporated the market oriented economies of Southeast Asia and the somewhat premature assumption of the end of ideology. Certainly, new, critical, deconstructive and constructivist methodologies were introduced into regional studies that challenged the rational and progressive assumptions informing the dominant social science

methodologies. Yet arguably, this putatively post modern approach with its renewed emphasis on culture, identity, and identity politics whilst constituting an important corrective to the secular universalism of the social sciences, has also obscured the manner in which discrete local practices interestingly adapted to the political and social requirements of developing social and political arrangements within the region. As the essay by Goh Beng Lan suggests rethinking Southeast Asia from local perspectives cannot be easily separated from social and historical contexts as well as personal commitments to social and political dilemmas that beset regional societies. From this perspective as Maria Diokono points out in her reflective essay on the development of studies of the region by regional scholars , in any reflexive study the entry point is still the self, whether as a Southeast Asian presence in one's country or a comparison between one's own and another in the region. Inevitably, as Professor Shamsul's interrogation of Southeast Asian Studies as a form of knowledge demonstrates any such local or western perspective or the hybrid product of their amalgamation is ultimately a knowledge construct that can only represent part of a region's social reality.

Thus, not only do our sometimes problematic methodological assumptions affect how we approach issues of culture, history sociology and politics in the region, the region itself, as both Collins and Shamsul show has never been a static, geopolitical or historical entity. Historically fragmented first by the era of European colonialism and subsequently its divisive Cold War aftermath, it has only relatively recently been possible to speak of anything like a cohesive Southeast Asian region. Even here, moreover, the impact of globalization, both in terms of the impact of the West and the rise of the new Asian, political and economic giants, China and India, is profoundly affecting the character of the region and local, state and regional modes of self understanding.

In this context, the fact that the region's political elites have an investment in maintaining the myth of an integrated Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) that comprise the ten significantly different states that comprise the region only further obscures understanding. For the states in the region range from the small, but wealthy sultanate of Brunei and the city state of Singapore (pop 5 million) to the vast archipelago of Indonesia (pop 200 million) with its range of indigenous cultures, religions and languages. Economically the region spans the growth

spectrum from the poorest countries on the planet (Laos, Burma/Myanmar, Cambodia) to the richest (Singapore). Politically, again the region is a laboratory of regimes ranging from autocratic military autocracies through sultanates, single party states, to semi-democracies and almost functioning democratic states. These various state forms host a bewildering variety of cultures and languages and despite the rhetorical claims of ASEAN language, communication and trade within the ASEAN states remains extremely limited. Survey data suggests that even amongst ASEAN elites, it is rare to find graduate students who have visited more than one other ASEAN state apart from their home.

The ASEAN process, in other words, as it applies to Southeast Asian Studies tends to gloss over constituting differences in order to promote an integrative vision. Yet at the same time, whilst Southeast Asian studies declines in the West, a little remarked but distinctive trend has emerged within South East Asia where with the exception of Myanmar/Burma and Laos, each state houses at least one center of Southeast Asian Studies. These centers function independently of ASEAN and it would seem independently of each other. These distinctive, indigenous ventures offer an opportunity to define South East Asia in a way that is both autonomous of reductionist western perspectives and a homogenizing ASEAN vision. It is evident that scholars in these centers are conducting and producing distinctive, original and interesting research published in local journals that deserve a wider audience. This failure to attract a broader audience reflects the problem of producing scholarly work in native languages (Thai, Viet, Bahasa primarily) and the prevailing constraints of academic and disciplinary orthodoxy. There is consequently a clearly defined need to draw these different and distinctive centers into some form of consortium that explores areas of expertise, curriculum and language studies and develops a shared data base to promote local scholarship and practice to a regional and international audience. It would be important that such a consortium remains housed in a regional center but also remains distinct from ASEAN style internal colonization.

The current volume, therefore, attempts to identify, reflect and engage with these epistemological, philosophical, political and cultural concerns. Thematically, we seek to consider and interrogate issues of inter state or regional politics; politics and political movements at the state level and developments at the substate level in politics, culture and economics. At the same

time *The ASEAN Way* and its implications for greater regional integration and enhancing regional cooperation will also be explored, whilst at the same time recognizing the often neglected challenges presented to regional integration at the state level and sub state level. The difficulty of marrying regionalism to national resilience or local self understanding, as Diokono and Goh evince, has been a consistent problem in Southeast Asia's inter state relations and one too often overlooked by both regional and western scholarship over determined by prevailing western orthodoxies governing the normative formation of suprastate arrangements.

In our concern to engage with micro and macro level studies of the issues of interaction, development and identity formation this project therefore illustrates the various challenges that currently confront both South East Asia and how we as students and scholars seek to understand and contextualize them. Whilst offering no solution to these issues their problematization in a distinctively Southeast Asian context enables us to move from the particular to the often universal concerns about state, region culture and identity formation in a globalized world that is interconnected but by no means integrated.