

# **SEAS IN SEA: EMERGENCE, DEVELOPMENT, REBRANDING AND SUSTAINABILITY OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES IN MALAYSIA\***

Hanafi Hussin<sup>1</sup> & Mala Rajo Sathian<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>First author

<sup>1,2</sup>Department of Southeast Asian Studies  
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

<sup>1</sup>Institute of Ocean and Earth Sciences (IOES)

<sup>2</sup>Thai Studies Program

University of Malaya

(hanafih@um.edu.my, malarajo@um.edu.my)

## **Abstract**

This article provides an introductory and brief overview of the research, publications, and achievements of Southeast Asian Studies in Malaysia, in particular, the role of the Department of Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Malaya. It briefly revisits the pre- and post-colonial times, when the subject of Southeast Asian Studies appealed to academics, administrators, and foreign experts. Since 1975, the Department has not only played the role of training young researchers in different issues on Southeast Asia but also provided a platform to local and foreign researchers to publish their scholarly work in *JATI-Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* and *Borneo Research Journals* that are both produced by the department annually.

*Keywords: Southeast Asian Studies, Department of Southeast Asian Studies, teaching, research, publication.*

\*an extended paper of Hanafi Hussin (2017) with corrected facts on the history of Southeast Asian Studies Programme at the Department of Southeast Asian Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Malaya.

## **Introduction**

In the last decade, Southeast Asian Studies (hereafter SEAS) has witnessed a decline in various universities and institutions in the west. On the other hand,

in Southeast Asia, this field of study is on the rise (Placzek, 2014). Indonesian scholars Muhadi Sugiano and Bambang Purwanto claimed that Southeast Asian Studies is a “baggage of colonial construct while ASEAN Studies was more locally engineered” (Sathian, 2015), indicating the declining popularity of the former in Indonesia. However, SEAS is rapidly developing as a formidable field of study in Malaysia. Although it did not gain importance until the 1970s, in the last four decades, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of research institutions, academics, researchers, graduates, and publications related to SEAS in the country. The department of SEAS, University of Malaya, has taken the pioneering step towards developing this field of study in Malaysia since its establishment in 1979.

Despite its long existence, the available literature on SEAS hardly mentions or refers to the research, publications, and efforts by the department in advancing SEAS in Malaysia for the last forty years. This article aims to provide a brief overview of the progress in the field of SEAS in Malaysia and to identify the limitations, issues and future challenges for the next generation of researchers focusing on SEAS in Malaysia as well as those within the region. The article will conclude with suggestions for possible ways to rebrand the field of SEAS to remain relevant in the future.

Data for the present article was obtained through a brief historical overview of the discipline in Southeast Asia, paying attention to scholarly articles published inside and outside of Malaysia in the field of SEAS. We noted that the progress and achievements of individual researchers and academic institutions are closely linked to the general ‘institution/al’ growth of centres or departments devoted to teaching and researching SEAS. By extension, we are concerned that with the gradual decline and discontinuation of SEAS programmes, the field of SEAS would be negatively impacted. Therefore, our urgent plea is for rebranding and rethinking SEAS.

### **Southeast Asian Studies Outside of Southeast Asia**

SEAS originated in the west (Tzeng, Richter, & Koldunova, 2018). There are some established centres of Asia, South and East Asian Studies in the United States and many others in Europe (Leiden, Freiburg, Uppsala, etc.).

In the West, Southeast Asian Studies has been taught either as a compulsory or optional subject. However, generally, it is approached as a multi-disciplinary module drawing theoretical, conceptual and methodological support from various social science disciplines, such as anthropology, history, geography, sociology, politics, and economics.