

Special Feature: Southeast Asian Studies: Crisis or Opportunity?

Southeast Asian Studies in Thailand

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I would like to talk about the state of Southeast Asian Studies in Thailand, but before I do so, I would like to just bring to your attention something that some academics have said about Southeast Asian Studies. First let's hear from Oliver William Wolters (1915-2000). In 1993, at a workshop in Jakarta, he said that "the major contribution of Southeast Asian studies within the region itself could be the enhancement of one's self-awareness in order to assist one in reaching a better understanding of the present. Perhaps, in an age of great change, there is more than ever a need for self-awareness" (Wolters 1993). To contextualize these comments, let us go back further to 1977. Two years after the Communist's victory in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos, Thak Chaloemtiarana and Sombat Chantornvong, two leading academics from Thammasat University, Bangkok, Thailand, made the interesting observation at a colloquium on Southeast Asian Studies at Kota Kinabalu,

Sabah, Malaysia that Southeast Asian studies in Thailand was parochial, meager, and "at square one." Hence, the implication here was that Southeast Asian Studies in Thailand was non-existent.

By the end of the '80s with the collapse of the Communist regimes in the West and tremendous changes in the East, Thailand was making record economic growth and was part of the so-called 'Asian Miracles.' In 1991, on behalf of my university, I attended a Kyoto-Thammasat Core University conference: "In Search of a Collaborative Framework for Southeast Asian Studies." There, I proposed that there was an urgent need and that the time was ripe to take action on Southeast Asian studies for Thailand.

Let me jump to the '90s again. In 1995, a group of some 50 academics and students from Thammasat, Chulalongkorn, and Sinlapakorn Universities, with support from the newly established Thailand Research Fund (TRF) held a discussion and their conclusion was the following:

"Now that Southeast Asia has become more and more of a regional entity, and now that it has received full recognition by universities in Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, and elsewhere, is it too late for us to reconsider Southeast Asian studies as an inter-discipline that deserves full academic attention...? Are we too late to act?"

So, is it really too late for us Southeast Asianists to reconsider Southeast Asian studies as an interdisciplinary field that deserves our full attention? Are we too late to act? Let us fast forward to the year 2000 for we can find one answer in the sudden proliferation of studies on Southeast Asia at various Thai Universities.

Chulalongkorn started with an M.A. program on Asian Studies, an 'international program.' But let us clarify that when we say international what we really mean is that English is the medium of instruction, it admits 10-20 students per year mostly from foreign countries, and tuition fees are very expensive. Thammasat also came up with a B.A. program; one that is 'special' with direct admission tuitions and high fees admitting 100 students per year. Thammasat also received support from outside donors, especially from Japanese government (via the Japanese Ministry of Education (MEXT)); Core University Program (Kyoto-Thammasat); Toyota Foundation, Japan; and Southeast Asian Studies Regional Exchange Program (SEASREP) which was established in 1994.

What the above proliferation suggests is that at present, there seems to be a shift in Thailand from "Southeast Asian



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Table 1. Expansion of Student Population and Universities

Population of Thailand	
1990	54 million
2000	61 million (up 1.10%)
2010	65 million (up 1.07%)
Students: High Schools Graduates	
1990	271,096
2000	292,244 (up 1.07 %)
2010	629,768 (up 2.15 %)
Universities	
1990	16 (state universities)
2000	24 (state universities)
2010	164 all universities (including private ones)

Source: Author

Studies” to what we can call a ‘trendy’ “ASEAN studies”: a kind of brand change. There are at least five B.A. programs in Southeast Asian or ASEAN Studies and these are not just limited to Bangkok, but also found in Chiang Mai, Phitsanulok, Nakhon Sithammarat, and so forth. Interestingly, in some universities the name of studies has been changed to ‘ASEAN’ Studies. This is meant to attract students and to also gear up toward the birth of the ASEAN Community in 2015.

We also have a number of acronyms which have become familiar all over Thailand. We have the Bangkok Declarations (5+5+1). If you are in Thailand now, you will find people discussing ASEAN’s ‘three legs’. These are APSC (ASEAN Political Security Community), AEC (ASEAN Economic Community), ASCC (ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community) with flags appearing all over Thailand, in particular in Universities. It is jokingly said that one can now make money from selling these flags... In addition to the above B.A. programs, there are five more M.A. plus one new Ph.D. program at Naresuan University in Phitsanulok. This type of academic proliferation can also be seen at Thammasat. The university now has one B.A program in “Southeast Asian Studies” (2000); one new ‘international’ M.A. for ASEAN Studies (2013); one research program called ASEAN Studies Center (2011); plus one research program in Southeast Asian Studies (2013). So the question that arises here is why has there been such an academic proliferation of these courses?

Firstly, there has been a big push from ASEAN with active campaigning by the Secretary General Dr. Surin Pitsuwan (2008-2012). Secondly, there was a positive response from Thai Government administrations. Initiated by the Abhisit’s (2010–11) and continued with Yingluck’s administration since 2011. This was not the case with Thaksin’s administration (2001–2006). Thus, we can see that ASEAN has become a trendy new brand in Thai primary and secondary education and there is

top down funding from the Ministries of Education and Culture. Thirdly, this proliferation becomes a lot clearer if we look at the following statistics (see Table 1.). The population has continued to increase and what is interesting here is that from 2000 to 2010, the student population has also shown an increase. Yet, what is most notable is also the increase in universities. Between 2000 and 2010 there has been an incredible proliferation of them in Thailand. This represents a change not just in Thailand, but also in Cambodia and Myanmar where you can see an increase in private universities, something that suggests a regional phenomenon.

If we look at Thammasat University, the Faculty of Liberal Arts has set up a Southeast Asian Studies program in 2000 (not funded by national/university budget). This program has direct admission (i.e. not through a national entrance exam), with 100 students registered per year. It focuses on an interdisciplinary approach, and the study of one Southeast Asian language (besides Thai) is compulsory. Tuition and fees are 35,000 baht (\$1120) per semester. Therefore the cost for a four year course amounts to 280,000 (\$8,950) for 4 years.

The program has been rather successful with a good number of applicants. It has also made a good profit as well. Unfortunately, it is less successful in creating an efficient administration and foster sufficient teaching staff and academics, not to mention research work or publications. It depends primarily on invited part-time or retired lecturers (like myself) including ‘borrowing’ regular Thammasat University teaching staff. The program has only four junior lecturers per 400 students. This is the kind of situation that most universities are facing at the moment.

The faculty of Social Sciences at Kasetsart University, also has a Southeast Asian Studies program which it established in 2007. As with Thammasat, it offers direct admission and has 100 students per year. The program focuses on an interdisciplinary

approach but at its inception, it did not require another Southeast Asian language (besides Thai). Tuition fees are the same as above. It does not have teaching staff of its own and therefore relies on regular faculty lecturers.

Walailak University, Nakhon Sithammarat offers a B.A. in ASEAN Studies, Liberal Arts. The program was established in 2002, two years after Thammasat, and what is of interest here is that at first it was offering area studies and due to its location in the south placing a strong focus on Malaysia and Indonesia with compulsory Bahasa language training. However, in 2011, its degree name was changed ASEAN Studies. The reason for this is that under the area studies guise, student registration dropped to 10 per year. However under the new guise it went up to 80 with the new ASEAN label. Students are admitted directly or through national entrance exams. Tuition fees are much less than in Bangkok, at 10,000 (\$31,400) per semester, and the program seems to work, but as with Thammasat there are issues with teaching staff.

To catch up with this trend, in Bangkok, the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Rajabhat Ban Somdet Chaophraya (teacher training college) started offering a Southeast Asian Studies program. This started in 2012, with seven students, and 10 the following year. Like most other teacher training colleges it fails to attract students. So it has started to offer 'free' admission and maintain low tuition fees. It employs three junior lecturers.

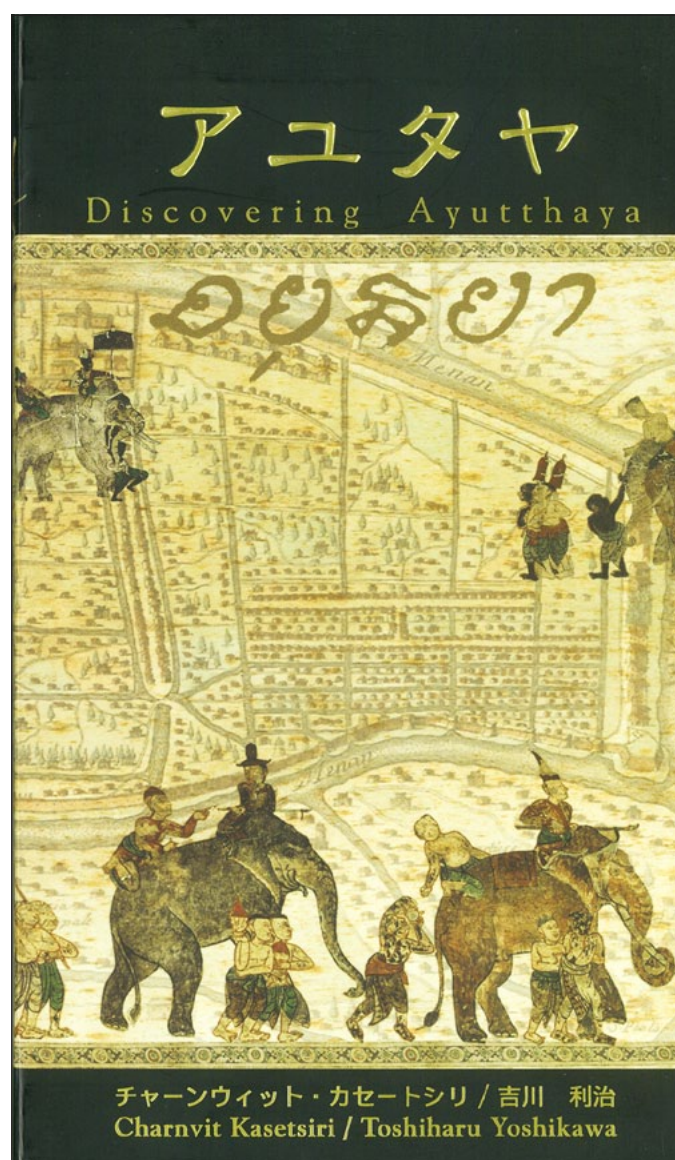
Mahidol University has an international program that was established in 2000. English is the medium of instruction and it is oriented to foreign students for those who take their semesters overseas. It offers Southeast Asian Studies and modern World History. At Chulalongkorn, we find that there is a Southeast Asian Studies 'international' program aimed for foreign students, with the highest fees: 450,000 (\$14,390) just for tuition fees. Thammasat's ASEAN Studies, 'international' program is 280,000 (\$8,950) for tuitions and fees. At Chiang Mai there is also a Southeast Asian Studies at 100,000 (\$3,200) (for weekday classes) and 160,000 (\$5,120) (for weekend) for tuition fees; Walailak offers a Southeast Asian Studies, regular program; and Sinlapakorn, Nakhon Pathom offers a Southeast Asian History (mainly Thai oriented) regular program.

In terms of Ph.D and M.A. studies, the Faculty of Social Sciences, Naresuan University, Phitsanulok was newly established in 2013 and it presently has 10 M.A. and 6 Ph.D. students. Tuition and fees for M.A. is 30,000 baht (\$960) annually, while a Ph.D. is 60,000 (\$1,920). We should note that these are rather inexpensive when compared to the B.A. programs that are now offered elsewhere. Interestingly, the program has five lecturers all with Ph.D. degrees who are conducting ten research projects funded by TRF.

So having looked at the increase of Southeast Asian Studies across the country, in conclusion, why do we see this proliferation? Are many of the programs that are classified as 'special' or 'international,' profit oriented and leading to the commercialization of education? It remains to be seen if "academic knowledge" of Southeast Asian studies, now somewhat termed as ASEAN studies, in Thailand, will take off or be, as we say in Thai, "*Fai Mai Fang*" (fire burning straw, i.e. it comes and goes quickly).

I am certain that from the above discussion we can hardly say that Southeast Asian studies does not exist in Thailand. It has been around despite being "parochial," a by-product of world politics, and being pushed from the outside (by USA and Japan). I myself am a byproduct of American education. Nonetheless, as has been discussed above, whatever its origin was in the '60s and '70s, Southeast Asian Studies by '90s has come to be a localized Thai response, as can also be seen in other parts of the region. By 2000, we came to witness the phenomenon of a 'proliferation' of Southeast Asian or ASEAN studies in Thailand.

So we have come full circle to what Wolters raised. If the time is ripe for self-awareness, as proposed by him, a genuine Southeast Asian studies in Thailand, or to a large extent Southeast Asian studies in Southeast Asia, has to be collaboratively worked out. There has never been a time where we have seen shared common, cross-cultured boundary problems as we do today. Thus, we in Southeast Asia hold the potential to become mirrors of one another. We can see problems but at the same time we hold the key to finding solutions together.



Discovering Ayutthaya (Japanese version) written by Charnvit Kasetsiri and Yoshikawa Toshiharu