

Special Feature: Southeast Asian Studies: Crisis or Opportunity?

Southeast Asian Studies in Japan

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For scholars situated in Japan, the immediate conditions surrounding Southeast Asian Studies today are perceived not so much as a crisis, since interest and relevance is pretty much sustained. If there is a crisis, I think it will derive from our becoming smug and inwardly self-satisfied within our country.

Ben Anderson used the term “ecology of scholarship” to refer to the total effect of the language of scholarship, epistemological tendencies in the scholarly practices, as well as the institutional set-up of academia. To these, we can add the geopolitical mapping of powers and the economics supporting the academic institutions. Social science disciplines are coming to a turning point as geopolitical delineations as well as intellectual challenges have been redrawn in the age of globalization, bringing to question area studies and its perspectives on regions and states. Having seen the end of the Cold War, on the one hand, scholars from the west are de-constructing and questioning the idea of “Southeast Asia” itself. Yet paradoxically, there is rising interest from within the region itself. What we see today is not a convergence towards global standardization of Southeast Asian studies, but towards exchange of ideas in a consortium of different traditions and perspectives.

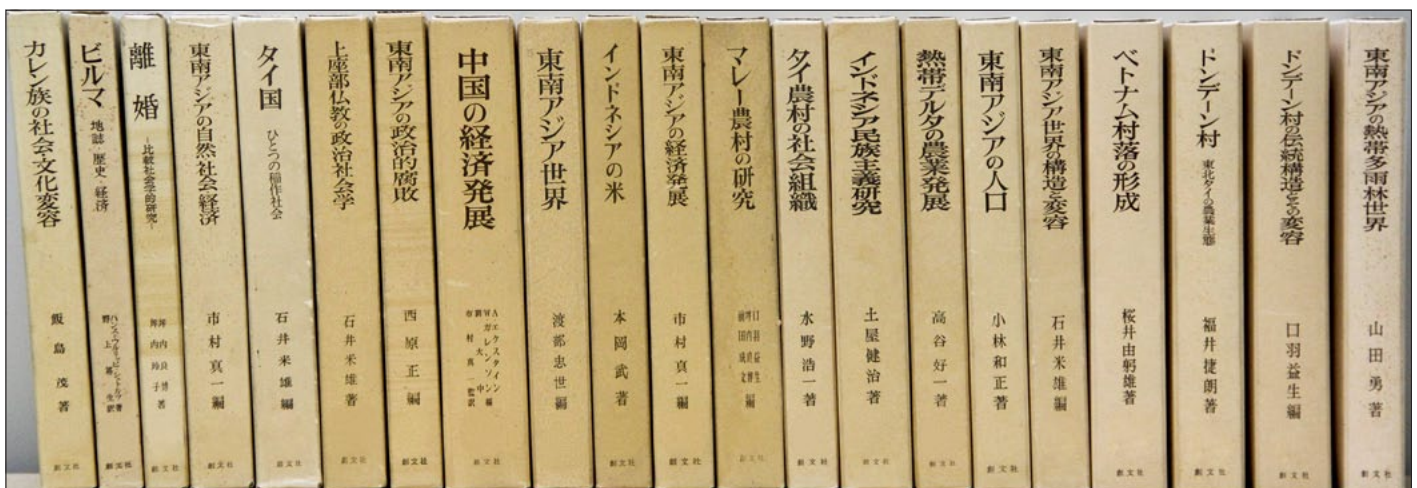
In Japan, “Southeast Asia” (*Tonan Ajia*) had already been in use in the context of imperialist expansion. Studies on the region began under systematic state interest under the propaganda of “The Greater East Asian Co-Prosperty Sphere” in the internecine decades. Many state agencies for research and training were founded for the study of the colonies, such as the research division of the Manchurian Railway Company among

others. After defeat and occupation, Japan re-imported “Southeast Asia” as a regional concept from the US. Since then, government as well as private agencies have funded and supported studies on various aspects of Southeast Asia, and with all this, interest in the region has been sustained.

The Japan Society for Southeast Asian History was founded in 1966 and renamed in 2006 as Japan Society for Southeast Asian Studies, and now has a membership of over 700. This does not include a further large number of scholars in various disciplines who work in the region. For the general public, there are innumerable publications and information sources on Southeast Asia, its culture, language, literature, economy, politics, travel, cuisine, arts and crafts, etc. There is substantial Japanese-language market for all kinds of information on the region i.e. plenty of incentives from within the country to write and publish in Japanese on various topics related to Southeast Asia.

Institutional foundations for research developed since the mid- '60s. The Center for Southeast Asian Studies at Kyoto University was founded in 1963, recognized by the government with funding from the Ford Foundation in 1965. The founding was itself instigated internally, by participants in informal seminars held by scholars of varied disciplines. Its distinctive feature was the inclusion of natural scientists: agronomists, foresters and biomedical specialists. The Institute for Asian and African Language and Culture at the Tokyo University of Foreign Studies was founded in 1964.

Field-based research began to take off in the late- '50s.



CSEAS Monographs (in Japanese). Published between 1966 and 1991

Systematic funding for overseas research by the ministry of education began in 1963, and scholarships for sending graduate students for long-term research in 1968. Long-term fieldwork by individual scholars, and multi-disciplinary projects took place on varying scales. While most scholars were trained in particular disciplines, they gained cross-disciplinary mutual stimulus in field trips, research and discussion there and back home. Our center is an example of how area studies in Japan was institutionalized without being based in any discipline or department. It was from the start, a multi-disciplinary institution.

Characteristic in Japanese scholarship is the emphasis on the researcher's groundedness in the local context based on language skills and long-term fieldwork, enabling sound empirical research. The flip side of this has been the tendency for weaker theoretical contributions. Japanese scholarship pursues research with conceptual frameworks closer to observations from the field. Perhaps this epistemological habitus, in addition to the language barrier, partially explains the low acceptance and low profile of Japanese scholarship in the English language academia. The kinds of data and arguments presented by Japanese scholarship do not necessarily answer the theory-driven interests of the English language audience. Moreover, while information in English and vernaculars of the region are consumed in Japan, there is much less effort to produce output available to non-Japanese audiences. With abundant opportunities in publishing within the country, there is less incentive to overcome the language hurdle and venture beyond.

If these are the weaknesses in our scholarship, by contrast, Ben Anderson criticized the discipline-based area studies in the US, where Southeast Asian studies was designed as programs across, but based on, disciplines and departments. The disciplines were always prioritized, both institutionally and in research, which he argues is "the institutional and intellectual weakness of area studies in the post-war US." Post-war area studies in the U.S. was carried out against the background of discipline-based academic professionalization and the habitus/practice of modern academics.

Since the foundation of ASEAN in 1967, area studies from within the region itself began to gradually develop. By the '80s, the region was undergoing rapid economic growth and political changes. By the '90s, the up-and-coming actors on the stage of Southeast Asian studies were scholars from the region itself. Just as western scholarship began to deconstruct and dissolve "Southeast Asian studies" and "Southeast Asia" as a regional concept in Southeast Asia itself, the region was becoming more "real," and its study becoming institutionalized. Scholars in the region began to reconsider some of the hitherto unchallenged official national and regional histories, concerns of the periphery such as minorities, as well as topics across national boundaries into other locales within the region. Another big rise, especially in the past two decades, is scholarship on Southeast Asia from Taiwan, China and Korea.

There has been discussion on the insider and outsider position in research. Scholars from the region are involved as primary actors, they have close vantage points, and have the advantage in gathering information, yet are at times constrained from expressing their ideas. Euro-American scholars

as outsiders define academic practice, set up the issues and concepts, conduct objective analysis, yet are disadvantaged in data collection. Euro-American strength in discipline-based theorization may have been related to physical, cultural and social distance and outsider position. Because they are distant from the immediate realities and issues brewing in the region, there is space to theorize, based on intellectual drives. Contrarily, as my colleague Caroline Hau pointed out, "for those in Southeast Asia, Southeast Asian studies is what people in the region are already doing: thinking about themselves." Japan stays "outside" this insider/outsider dichotomy. We find ourselves in something like a "neither here nor there" space. We neither constitute a visible part of the western scholarship, nor are we within Southeast Asia.

However, I think what is actually taking place now is far more complex and multifarious than an "insider-outsider" dichotomy. There is global re-mapping of multilateral research directions, where western theorizing is no longer the only significant voice in Southeast Asian area studies, and scholars from the region as well as in other mostly Asian countries participate. Scholars from different backgrounds cross the boundaries of these academic traditions with ease. In this multilateral intersection of perspectives, Southeast Asia is not the "other," the object of the hegemonic gaze, or of unidirectional theorizing. These perspectives cross each other where research, education and mutual discussion is all going in many directions.

For those of us in Asia, while it is true that academic tradition in each country has its own historical relationship with the region, different socio-economic basis, institutionalizing process, and different ecology of scholarship, still, the immediacy of issues, such as (for example) coping with disasters, sustainable development, energy-sources, demographic changes, etc. are shared, and we are together involved in the real issues of the region. Multilateral discussions in Asia will allow us to set the agenda from region-based perspectives. Our discussion and debates derive from questions and concerns that are important in the region. While we continue to learn from debates in the Euro-American Southeast Asian studies, we should develop ways of agenda-setting from within the region that can engage in fruitful dialogue with the former.

Today, Japan's relationships with ASEAN is becoming even more crucial. In 1990, ASEAN-7 was about 10% of Japan's economy. In 2012, it was 38% and according to IMF estimates, it will be 67% by 2018. The ASEAN community 2015 promises a more institutionally integrated and harmonized regional economy, with rising middle classes and expanding markets. In the past several years, Japanese businesses learned the political risks of investing in China, and now find in ASEAN expanding consumer markets with far less political risk. The Japanese government, in a tense relationship with China over territorial issues, is pursuing partnerships with ASEAN not only in trade, investment and finance, but also in security and foreign policy towards building the regional architecture. We, as academics, cannot but be affected by such political and socioeconomic trends. Southeast Asian studies in Japan becomes as important as ever. There is the strong possibility, in view of Japanese government policy for university reform and internationalization, that South-



east Asian studies, (rather than area studies in general), will emerge as one of the “focus fields” for government funding.

This trend constitutes an opportunity not only for us in Japan. There is a sizable foundation or a potential network between Southeast Asia and Japan, in varied disciplines and fields, from the hard sciences to the humanities. Southeast Asian scholars trained in Japan, as well as Japanese researchers, business people, journalists, etc. who work on/in Southeast Asia with scholars in the region (without necessarily being Southeast Asianists). This creates a broad base or constituency for Southeast Asian specialists to coordinate and for bringing disparate fields and people together. This could become the basis for multilateral exchange through international networking and collaboration, including Northeast Asia, America and Europe.

I mentioned that in the founding days of our Center, disciplinary boundaries were overcome through joint research involving field trips and observations, discussion there and back in the seminar rooms among scholars from different disciplines with widely-defined interests, towards new framework of understanding. Such academically fertile settings for dialogues have become more difficult to stage today due to diversification of interests and deeper specialization. Yet our predecessors have demonstrated that the effort is worthwhile, and we might emulate the spirit of it towards dialogue not only across disciplines, but across different academic traditions, in a global multilateral network especially among scholars of the upcoming generation.

Recognizing that each stands in a different position within a different ecology of scholarship, dialogue or “multi-logue” in the multilateral network among these different traditions promises to be productive. This should be facilitated by the following activities:

- 1) Flow and exchange of researchers and scholars, and beyond academia.
 - a) Focus on education no longer limited to undergraduate and graduate education. Postdoctoral training and networking among upcoming generation of scholars.
 - b) Creating interfaces between Southeast Asian scholars on the one hand and governments, businesses, NGOs etc on the other.
- 2) Joint projects and programs among scholars from different academic traditions and disciplines. The challenge is how to go beyond Japan and beyond academia, and create platforms for conversations and collaboration with ASEAN counterparts as well as East Asian and global partners.
- 3) Improving ways of sharing information, data and material.
 - a) Catching up with varied forms of material that are becoming available.
 - b) Not only in the central archives of each country, but from multiple local vernacular perspectives.
 - c) Alter the hitherto one-way flow of local language information, stalling resources in local libraries
 - d) Digitizing information to make available varied forms of information to scholars from both within and outside the region.

- 4) Joint effort to strengthen the impact of our outputs/publications. There is nothing we can do about the dominance of English language in the global academe but we need to make available more of the works and materials from the region towards a fair exchange of ideas and information.

In conclusion, it has come to a point where, Southeast Asianist scholars, whether in Southeast Asia, or in other parts of Asia, Europe, Australia, or the US, must re-position ourselves to changing academic maps: to reflect on our respective positions in the evolving “ecology” of the global academic endeavor.