

Special Feature: Southeast Asian Studies: Crisis or Opportunity?

The Development of Southeast Asian Studies in Korea

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In Korea, academic interest in Southeast Asia first arose in the early 1960s, when some language programs were offered in college education. It is also around this time that Korea entered into diplomatic relations with major nations in Southeast Asia. However, very little research was done during the '60s and '70s.

What can be regarded as the first Southeast Asia area specialists only appeared in the '80s. Their emergence was related to the government's policies for liberalization and opening up the economy. It was around this time that many Koreans began to show an interest in other foreign countries, particularly in less well-known countries, including those in Southeast Asia. Thus, by the early '90s South Korea had opened up to a much wider and strong currents of "globalization" and "regionalization."

In this context, the majority of the first generation Southeast Asianists who started their academic careers during the late '80s and early '90s majored in political science and in particular, in comparative politics and international relations. It was around this time that an important institutional development in Southeast Asian Studies took place. In June 1991, the Korean Association of Southeast Asian Studies (KASEAS), was established and started to publish its own official journal, the *Southeast Asian Review*, in 1992.

A Study Group on Southeast Asian Politics, the predecessor of the Korean Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (KISEAS), was formed in December 1990 with eight political scientists. Later on it began to recruit more scholars from other disciplines such as anthropology, economics, and sociology. In 1992, this was expanded into a Study Group on Southeast Asian Studies. Finally, it was in 2003, that it was further expanded and reorganized into the present day form of KISEAS.

From around the mid- '90s a new generation of Southeast Asia area specialists began to join this academic field and Southeast Asian Studies in Korea began to develop and mature. Second generation researchers had a keen interest in the area of Southeast Asia from the early stage of their academic careers and received more systematic training both in undergraduate and graduate schools. They were also stimulated by the enthusiastic academic atmosphere created by the proliferation of academic societies such as KASEAS and KISEAS. One of the

significant features of the second generation is that conducting long periods of fieldwork became de rigueur for them.

At the beginning of the 2000s, more and more young scholars with Ph.Ds in various disciplines were entering the field of Southeast Asian Studies. They were more diverse in terms of their academic backgrounds and the universities from which they graduated. Above all, the number of anthropologists substantially increased compared to the past and other disciplines during this period.

It may be premature to judge the first decade of the 21st century to be the most fertile period in the history of Southeast Asian Studies in Korea. But, it is nonetheless fair to say that it was an era of very productive, progressive, and promising, academic work both in quantity and in quality.

One of the noteworthy characteristics of the last decade is that many new research issues and themes have been developed and pursued. Firstly, there have been a series of studies on regionalism in Southeast Asia and East Asia including such themes as regional cooperation, economic integration, and the East Asian community. Secondly, more recently, many Korean researchers have become more interested in trans-border human exchange issues such as transnational migration, international marriage, migrant laborers, and resultant social problems that arise through human movement. Thirdly, "Hallyu," or the "Korean Wave," in Southeast Asia has also become an issue that has recently been studied and debated. Fourthly, the study of connections and networks between Southeast Asia and other countries or regions have become another issue of research interest that has been frequently pursued by researchers interested in the formation of the region. Another outstanding feature of Korean Southeast Asian Studies in the last decade is that collaborative research projects have proliferated. Many researchers have formed their own research teams and conducted research on common agendas and issues over a number of years.

The first decade of the 21st century has also witnessed notable progress in terms of institutional developments. The KISEAS has now become more formalized academically and continues to play a role by providing an academic arena where

scholars and researchers can regularly meet, discuss and exchange ideas.

At this point, we should mention the role the KASEAS has played over the last 10 years. It has long held regular academic conferences bi-annually since its inception. Since the early 2000s, it has also held regular academic conferences every two years in cooperation with the ASEAN University network. It has also organized joint conferences with Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS) Kyoto University every two years since 2009.

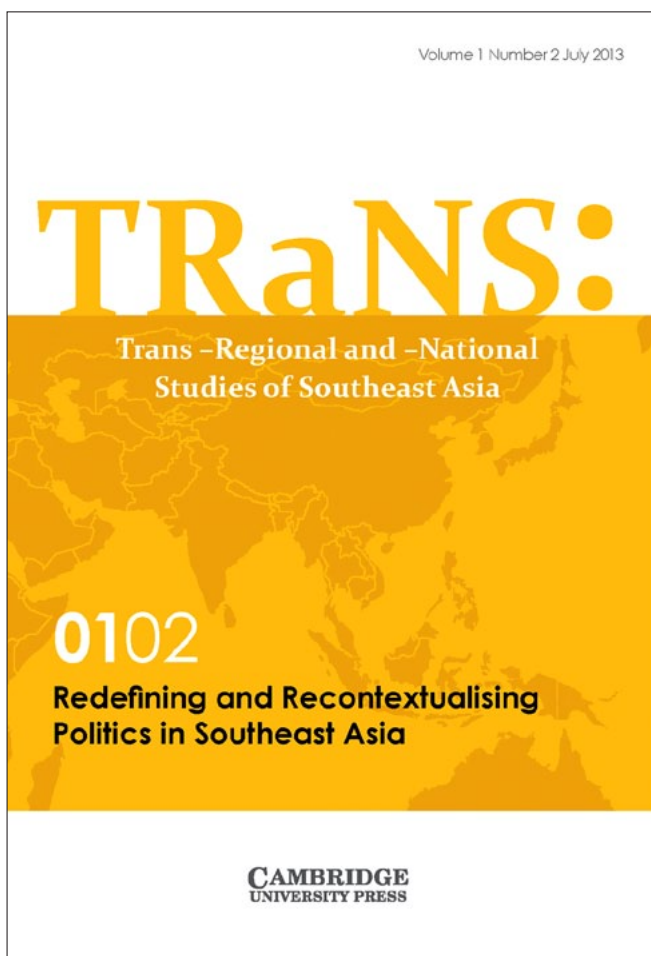
Above all, the role of Institute for East Asian Studies, Sogang University at Seoul merits attention as since 2008, it has been conducting a grand-scale research project sponsored by the National Research Foundation of Korea. It has become a central institute for Southeast Asian studies in Korea and has attempted to globalize its research activities. This effort culminated in the launch of a new English journal named *TRANS: Trans-Regional and -National Studies of Southeast Asia* in early 2013, published by Cambridge University Press.

However, there are a number of problems and limitations that Korean scholars need to tackle. Firstly, although we should not underestimate what has been accomplished by Korean academics, we need to develop more analytical and theoretical approaches to Southeast Asia.

Secondly, we need to make a more serious effort to transcend disciplinary boundaries and to ultimately integrate them into a unique and independent discipline of "Southeast Asian Studies" or "Southeast Asiology," something that is still conspicuously lacking. What is needed is not just an inter- or multi-disciplinary approach to the region but a trans-disciplinary and integrative approach to the study of Southeast Asia, although that might not be an easy task to accomplish in the near future.

Lastly, although more and more research results are being published in English and other languages, most publications on the region have been in the Korean language. This language barrier has prevented them from being widely known, and as a result of this they remain unknown to foreign audiences. So that more research conducted by Korean Southeast Asianists can reach academics in other countries, we need to increase academic exchanges and collaborative research through a common language to encourage communication.

Despite these limitations, arguably Korea has been emerging as one of the leading countries in this particular moment when Southeast Asian studies has been downsizing in the early runners such as the US and Europe. We hope that in the near future, when Korea demonstrates quality research outcomes and its own approach to Southeast Asian studies, then our contribution to the scholarship will more deeply appreciated.



TRANS: Trans – Regional and – National Studies of Southeast Asia



The Southeast Asian Review (published by the Korean Association of Southeast Asian Studies)