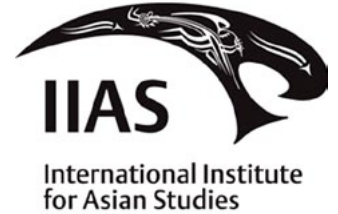


Special Feature: Southeast Asian Studies: Crisis or Opportunity?

Southeast Asian Studies from the Perspective of the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), Leiden

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I am an historian by training working on Southeast Asia, especially Vietnam, and later on Cambodia. In this latter country I was involved in developing a capacity building institution, the Center for Khmer Studies, both an international and a Cambodian organization. Today, I am working as director of the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), an institute with a global reach but rooted in the Dutch/European academic context. In addition, I retained a position as a Visiting Scholar at the Institute for Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore. There are therefore many dimensions and angles through which I should discuss the issue of Southeast Asian studies.



Philippe Peycam, Director of IIAS

Concerning the challenges and opportunities for Southeast Asian Studies (SEAS), I feel that we are currently at a major crossroads with major transformations taking place in the knowledge production process, both in terms of what we mean by Southeast Asian studies, and how we actually do it institutionally. These changes are affecting the way SEAS has been previously conceived. I see these changes both in terms of a process of decentering and re-centering of the field which becomes more “global,” with a multiplicity of actors both within and outside Southeast Asia, and simultaneously, the possibility of opening new intellectual and methodological boundaries beyond the traditional “area studies” model with its old reference to nation-states as we have been used to. As we know, the field has been dominated by a Western academic model through Cold War “area studies,” and before it, the colonial “orientalist” tradition. The institutional model of production and transmission of knowledge has also been characterized by the dominance of the West. If we take in the bigger picture today, we see that we are living in a time where there are new spaces and flows to approach human reality, that of the societies which constitute “Southeast Asia.”

Of course, we could discuss the validity of “Southeast Asia” as a term and concept, as it is still very problematic. As I work at IIAS, when I attempt to look at the region in the larger, global / “Asian” - perspective, I see that a great deal of attention in the West is oriented primarily towards China and India. When people often think about Asian studies, they mean China and Chinese studies. That trend in itself reveals a current Western agenda and anxiety with regard to the rise of China. This has led to an increased marginalization of Southeast Asia as a subject of study and a source of meaning. As Mario Lopez and Shimizu Hiromu have pointed out, as managers of academic institutions, we see SEAS in Western and Japanese institutions suffering because of funding cuts and a depletion of language training resources. This process is only partially compensated by the development of SEAS Centers in newly “rich” North-East Asian countries like China and Korea, and in the “rich countries” of Southeast Asia such as Singapore, which are building their own capacities, usually following the same institutional “Western” model.

The fact that Southeast Asia, as a field of study, has been fragmented in national and linguistic subtopics, at university and national levels, has led to more financial cuts. In the neo-

liberal age of commercialization of higher education, cuts are bound to occur with small subjects because they are unlikely to attract a large demand from students. Of course, SEA languages such as Khmer or Burmese are exposed to these influences. In overall terms, this trend may not be deemed to be too serious at an institutional level, yet it contributes to killing the diversity of knowledge production of a large and diverse area such as Asia (another complex notion in itself). These are sometimes huge cuts, as the one experienced recently in the US with the depletion of Title six funding. These are very sad situations in the sense that they not only kill communities of students and teachers, but they impoverish the overall knowledge foundation of any given institution.

Yet, these trends may be mitigated by increased inter-institutional collaboration, the definition of new thematic research and teaching subjects, and an increased connectivity with other centers of knowledge: beyond the West and Japan, outside and within Southeast Asia. This new situation may help us to not only decenter, but actually re-center the process of knowledge production of Southeast Asia. Such trends, I believe are not bad for students and new scholars on the region. I see an opportunity to frame new topics of study that can better interlace local and global experiences while offering scholars and students a chance to go beyond their traditional "national" academic system/approach, encouraging them to travel and work in Southeast Asia with people of the region, as well as elsewhere in the world – not necessarily in Western institutions.

For one thing, I believe that we – Western and Japanese institutions – need to learn to work more in partnership with Southeast Asian and Asian institutions. To me, the epitome of traditional areas studies is the fact that, not only an American or European, but also an Indonesian or a Korean would need, if they want to learn about Indonesia, to travel to Cornell University –and it is not my intention to offend anyone when I make these comments — in the middle of a mountainous region of the New York State, where, until now you had one the best center of Southeast Asian studies. This is likewise with Burmese studies at Northern Illinois University, the School of African and Asian Studies (SOAS) in London, or for Cambodian studies, in Paris. We have to ask ourselves why don't we have centers closer to Indonesia, Burma or Cambodia with more interactions with local individuals and institutions, or else, why these centers of excellence are always in the West but not in Africa, Latin America, China or even Korea. This situation is of course a result of history, but it must change.

I therefore see a chance for the field to grow, though a process of knowledge production reclaimed by the people and institutions in the region – especially if they succeed in moving beyond narrow national foci. This knowledge of Southeast Asia can also be developed in other parts of Asia, and well beyond, in an increasing multipolar world. Present at this panel is Professor Webby Kalikiti, Secretary of the African Association for Asian Studies (A-ASIA) and himself a "Southeast asianist." Southeast Asia is no longer just the domain of Western and Japanese scholars or even that of rich North-East Asian countries. It can now become the focus of academic enquiry from scholars and students from hitherto unconnected regions of

the world like Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and so forth. This new range of international academic "actors" has not been traditionally involved in the intellectual dialogues that pertain to the region. The same can be said about the multitude of new Southeast Asian institutes, local institutions, and younger scholars, often from unprivileged countries in the region, or countries where the higher education system is weak, who, thanks to the new fluidity of education and scholarship ongoing within the region, are now more likely to participate in the knowledge production process.

Drawing from my own experiences in Cambodia where I was involved in the training and promotion of young local scholars following the tragic recent history there, I saw many of these individuals who, despite the bad shape of the Cambodian university system, managed to find their way, in the country and abroad, and acquire a very high level of competency and a capacity to reach high levels of international scholarship. Their numbers are fast increasing. This same process is true for Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam, Indonesia and so forth.

While working in Cambodia, I often witnessed how these up and coming young Southeast Asian scholars encountered multiple difficulties when they tried to access some established institutions overseas. Within the region, some mental barriers are perpetuating: they are usually not interested in studying in the Philippines, despite the high level of some of this country's institutions or; when they wanted to study in Thailand or Singapore where they were restricted by high costs (Thailand); or the almost unattainable requirements put in front of them (Singapore). NUS, for instance, is a very good institution in Southeast Asia. If you want a fellowship as a Southeast Asian national, you have to have an almost Shakespearean command of the English language (Michael Fenner from ARI interjects "it's higher than that demanded from most U.S. institutions!"). This is in Southeast Asia. There must be ways to improve the decentering of knowledge production within the region which must start with easier access to institutions, more information, and the stronger will of the region's governments to foster education. In any case, this process of growing interaction between different intellectual traditions in Southeast Asia should be encouraged. This is also true at the global level.

Another point I should like to underline is that to move beyond the old Western dominated knowledge production process, we also need to move beyond old categories inherited from this model, such as the nation-states, or the old colonial / neo-colonial geographic constructions. We also need to think about the institutional configuration of higher education itself and the need to review the kind of over-specialization that today exists in "functionalist" Western academia. Among the subjects that should be enhanced for Southeast Asian studies, I think in particular of questions of trans-national/regional/pre or post-national interests, including the existence of networks. I can also think of subjects like material culture, local indigenous knowledge and so forth. These can contribute to change rigidly framed disciplines that are continuing to fragment SEAS. And as for changing the way we as scholars "specialize" in the university architecture of today, I believe it is not only important to move beyond disciplinary boundaries, but sometimes, to go

beyond professional or specialization “sectors”: this means that anthropologists should not only learn to work with historians, but also with “practitioners” of the city (urban planners, architects), with artists and members of the craft communities, etc. In other words, go beyond their ethnographic research.

To stress what I see is a need for a more de-centered, interdisciplinary and multi-sector field of Southeast Asian studies, I should end thoughts by briefly describing what we are trying to do at IIAS – even if our range goes beyond Southeast Asia. IIAS is based in Leiden, Holland and we now see ourselves as a global facilitator. We are aware of our Dutch/European background, but we want to incorporate a truly multi-centered and multi-vocal approach to what and whom we study. We run more activities outside Europe, notably in Asia, than we do in Holland or Europe, and we are very active in Southeast Asia. All our activities are collaborative and we work on an equal partnership basis, whether being major universities, small institutes, municipalities, NGOs or other social community groups. Concretely, to only discuss Southeast Asia, we have forged a strong array of connections, in Singapore, Indonesia and in Thailand. We aim to develop links in other countries and with other actors in the region.

We have identified three thematic clusters – the practice and politics of culture and cultural heritage, Asian cities and the “urban factor”; connectivity in Asia and beyond, with what we call “the global projection of Asia.” Under these three cross-disciplinary/sector themes, IIAS engages with global/Southeast Asian scholars and partners. These themes enable us to interact with people from different backgrounds, disciplines and even sectors of activity. We have, for instance, organized a number of events involving different strands of activities: a roundtable on Indonesian coastal cities in Palembang (2011), a strategic workshop with Nusa Tenggara weavers, local governments and scholars of Eastern Indonesia (2012), a training program on heritage management for city officials and members of the civil society of Yangon, Myanmar (2013), a planned summer school on craft and power in Chiang Mai (2014). Moreover, we make sure that in many of our activities dealing with anything related to Asia – under the three clusters –, scholars and experts from Southeast Asia are involved. For instance, for our recent roundtable on old Taipei, in November 2012, we invited participants from Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia and Singapore. They positively interacted with their counterparts from North, East and South Asia.

At ICAS held in Macau 2013, IIAS sponsored ten panels, many of which include participants from Southeast Asia, or covered aspects of Southeast Asia. One engaged city practitioners with scholars on cities. Another one brought together artists and social scientists. One involved textile craftsmen with political scientists and anthropologists. One more involves the development of partnerships between Asian/Southeast Asian institutions and their African counterparts. IIAS works not just with universities, but also civil societies and local government partners. It adapts to the institutional landscape in a pragmatic way to ensure that we reach out to new partners within the region who can contribute to widening the knowledge base on Southeast Asia. We are eager to forge new alliances both within

and outside the region serving an ever multi-centered and inclusive field of exchange of knowledge.

I believe in a process of affirmative action to help shape a critical mass of Southeast Asian scholars, especially from less economically developed countries, capable of interacting with their international counterparts, about Southeast Asia, and also about other subjects (when will we have Vietnamese scholars interacting with colleagues on Thai, Indonesian, French or American studies?).

We have had similar discussions with our colleagues from the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore. This institute, I believe, could play a major role in connecting scholars from the region; likewise with the SEASREP program based in Manila which links up scholars and institutions within the region. To sustain an inclusive Southeast Asian studies momentum in the region, institutions need to go beyond petty national and administrative policies. A more interactive, trans-national model can truly act as catalyst of change, with the active participation of young scholars from countries not always equipped to be part of this process.

We seek to contribute to Southeast Asia and beyond, by encouraging scholars from the different regions of the world to interact with their Southeast Asian colleagues. The January 2015 conference in Accra, Ghana, will see the first pan-African conference on Asian studies. IIAS will hopefully partner with other institutes to encourage more comparisons and exchanges between SEA and Africa and to commit to furthering fruitful and productive collaborations.



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