

Special Feature: Southeast Asian Studies: Crisis or Opportunity?

Southeast Asian Studies in Southeast Asia: A View from Singapore

R. Michael Feener

Associate Professor, Asia Research Institute (ARI),
National University of Singapore



What I want to do here is to reflect on the state of Southeast Asian Studies, and how it looks from Singapore in the context of the questions asked at the roundtable held in Macau.

Building upon its place as a regional infrastructure and educational hub, for the past 50 years, Singapore has come to play a major role in the development of Southeast Asian Studies in the region both at the National University of Singapore (NUS) and the Institute for Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS). NUS which was one of the first institutions in Southeast Asian that really began to develop an international research profile in the field by drawing in scholars from all across the region and beyond who came to base their work in Singapore. However, the rapid economic growth of Singapore in recent decades has attracted new waves of migrants in all fields including a lot of migrant academics. They have been drawn there by a range of different factors including relatively good resources and research funding and also, very importantly, close proximity to the field. If you are going to work in Southeast Asia, it is a much shorter commute from Singapore than most other places. But also, importantly, it has become a real pull for the opportunities it gives for interaction with an increasingly vibrant academic community centered there.

I was happy to see some of my colleagues from NUS – in particular from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and from NUS Press, at ICAS in Macau. They are in a position to talk more broadly as to how NUS has staked itself out in the field. So I will try to keep my remarks focused on the Asian Research Institute (ARI) which is the unit within NUS where much of my work has been focused. ARI has been around since 2001 and arose from one of NUS' myriad strategic initiatives the administration throws up from time to time. But, I think that it is one of the few initiatives that has grown its own legs. Over the past 12 years, ARI has developed into a major site of not only regional, but also global scholarly collaborations: we have just over 80 faculty members and researchers from 24 different countries. We also hold a large portfolio on MOUs and collaborative research programs with other institutions across Asia, as well as in North America, Europe, and Australia.

One of the advantages of work at ARI is that it is interdisciplinary and we bring together scholars under clusters from different disciplines to look at different focused areas of research. I am currently in charge of the unit that looks at religion in Asia,

which has been a very active unit within ARI over the past decade. Work at ARI has contributed to some significant studies in Southeast Asia over the past few years. This has been significantly facilitated by both resources and location. Both of these have contributed to new configurations of research personnel that have come together to work on projects that have served to reshape some of the relationships between scholars and the objects of their studies, in some very stimulating and productive ways.

One result of this has been a significant shift in the way in which work being done on Asia at NUS is framed. That is, the work of Southeast Asian Studies in a place like ARI is not primarily conceived so much of studies of Asia as an *object*, rather than of studies of diverse social phenomena in Asia as a *con-*



R. Michael Feener. Source: Author



text. This shift makes a huge difference in our approach to the field and toward others in the environment. This shift is not just semantic: it reflects a whole new kind of position for area studies scholars in relation to their field. In addition to this general reconfiguration of the field, there is also some innovative conceptual work taking place locally that aims to try to develop new models for understanding connections linking diverse communities both within Asia and to the broader world beyond. With Prasenjit Duara as head of ARI, the current focus on interactions within and across Asia has been very productive to bring scholars from around the region and beyond to enter into new kinds of conversations.

Another exciting new line of development that we have seen at NUS over the recent years involves the way in which we explore new frameworks for constructive interaction between academics and professional practitioners from other fields. This is something that I started engaging with a few years ago with some work on Islamic legal professionals in Asia. We started to organize a series of workshops with participants that included professionals from fields beyond academics - bringing in judges and lawyers from Islamic jurisdictions from around the region to come to work together. I am sure that you are all familiar with the saying that working with academics is like herding a group of cats; now think about throwing a bunch of lawyers and judges into the mix. In terms of administrative issues it takes things to a whole new level. But it has been possible to do at NUS in a way that it would not be in many other places due to its location. To get a dozen Shari'a court judges to a conference in the United States is in itself a major challenge, starting with immigration issues. But, we can still manage to do that in Singapore. So to be able to bring in these regional participants who aren't academics by training, but are doing very thoughtful work in the areas that we are interested in has created a whole new set of conversations: something that is very exciting. We are now doing this more systematically at ARI as part of our project on "Religion and Development."

It is, of course, also very challenging particularly in ways that we can produce publications that can capture some of the dynamics of the conversations we have there, and also how we can also communicate these to broader professional audiences. This is the thing NUS has been trying to do and it is building on these experiences. Some of the current work that we are doing at ARI has moved to build these new frameworks and conversations in new directions. For example our project on "religion and development" and that has brought in practitioners from a number of international relief and development agencies that have either regional offices in Singapore or that have operations based in Southeast Asia. This is with the aim to try to come up with a new series of conversations that look at major social phenomena within the social context of Asia: but all the time focusing much more on Asia as a context rather than as an object of study.

These developments are all very promising. There are more people coming and new lines of research being developed. But we still face challenges. Firstly, places like ARI are embedded in institutional contexts in Asia that have relatively underdeveloped traditions in the humanities and the social sciences, in

which usually more resources are dedicated to areas such as the natural sciences and engineering. Some have attempted to establish work in the humanities and social sciences as having some kind of direct policy relevance. Many academic institutions in Singapore and across the region are directly involved in the work of consulting government on various matters. ARI is unique in NUS in that it works without any such expectations. Yet, this space for academic work does require constant justification to the higher administration of the university as to why our work could be worth the time, energy, and resources that goes into it. So this might also be a problem that other institutions in the region face which on the institutional context where work from the social sciences and the humanities doesn't have the same kind of social prestige or historical track record that we'd find in European or North American Universities.

Another final significant challenge that we've seen at NUS is that ARI is a completely post PhD institution. The university is still not producing many leading doctorates in the field of Asian studies. We have made some remarkable progress toward this in recent years, but we still are seeing relatively few Singaporean students coming through NUS who are really attaining global visibility in the field. Many of our students do their studies there and then go off to one of these legacy centers of Asian Studies in Europe, North America, and Australia to get their PhD. So, we are faced with significant challenges in trying to make NUS a place where not just well established scholars will come to work late in their careers, but as a place where you can foster an upcoming intellectual community. There are some real institutional problems with this. For example the short limits of having five years to complete a PhD; the relative lack of language training; and a relatively small window to do fieldwork. In some of the more established programs abroad, you can get good PhDs because you can teach them languages, give them the years they need to do this, and to carry out extensive fieldwork. These are simply not options in a place like Singapore, unfortunately.

So there are some real institutional constraints to producing the kinds of scholars that you are getting in other places. How can NUS be a place that attracts people coming in, and how can it really work to more vigorously develop them and scholarship? These are the constant issues we face in what is a constantly evolving field and region. For the future development of Asian Studies in Asia, however, it is imperative that we work more on producing, and not just absorbing, the most productive and prominent scholars in the field.