



Conference on Southeast Asian Studies in Asia

SUMMARY REPORT

In January 2002, the University of the Philippines' Asian Center organized an international conference workshop on "SEA Studies in Asia: An Assessment Towards a Collaborative Action Plan". Although it was not the first attempt to gather together scholars and specialists to review the status of Southeast Asian studies in the region, the event was certainly a milestone as it attempted to take stock of the gains, the limitations and most especially, the current challenges facing Southeast Asian studies in light of the changing regional and global milieu.

In this increasingly globalized world, it is no longer within the context of national and regional developments that the limitations and the potentials of Southeast Asian studies should be situated. The more important challenge posed today is how to keep Southeast Asian studies vital and relevant, not only to the sub-region but also to Asia and the world as a whole.

One recognizes the reality that the development of Southeast Asian studies in East Asia is uneven, with some countries and institutions devoting more resources than others, certain fields of study more emphasized than others and the areas of research focus defined in varying degrees against the backdrop of each country's respective national histories and pace of progress. Still, the urgency of the need to come together is apparent as

each confronts the question of the need for new approaches, perspectives and discursive spaces to capture both the diversity and unity of Southeast Asia. The time is also ripe for efforts to broaden networking on Southeast Asian studies among scholars in the region, especially after the 1980s, whilst building on existing networks or reviving old ones.

The objectives of the conference workshop were to examine the state of contemporary teaching and research on Southeast Asia being undertaken in Southeast Asia, as well as in Japan, Korea and China (including Hong Kong), and to identify possible cooperative activities for the promotion of Southeast Asian studies in Asia. There was a special emphasis on graduate-level academic programs. The conference presentations during the first two days were divided into two parts: the first part focused on the teaching and research on Southeast Asian studies as a whole in each of the participating countries (e.g. Southeast Asian Studies in Vietnam), and the second part on the teaching and research on one's own country (e.g. Cambodian Studies in Cambodia).

A workshop on the third day was designed to identify problems and concerns in Southeast Asian studies as well as to recommend an agenda of projects and activities that would help address such problems. Three workshop groups looked into problems and issues in teaching, research and publications, and explored ideas for collaborative projects for future consideration by the workshop participants.

The Conference-Workshop was attended by 32 participants and 15 observers from the Philippines and 25 delegates from foreign countries. Although they come from varied national and disciplinary backgrounds, they all shared a common concern for the problems and certainly for the future of Southeast Asia and Southeast Asian studies. What follows is a summary of the findings and the workshop recommendations from the conference.

General Features of Southeast Asian Studies in Participating Institutions

Most of the institutions represented during the conference were relatively new in offering Southeast Asian studies – whether as full programs or as courses offered in different units. Only China and the Philippines had programs established in the 1950s; Malaysia and Japan in the 60s; Cambodia, Indonesia, Hong Kong and Laos in the 90s while most recently, Indonesia and Thailand also established their own programs.

The origins of such programs varied but a common thread was that the seeds had been planted by academics concerned with Southeast Asian cultures and demography. The participation of other disciplines followed later.

Uneven institutional development in each country arose from several factors:

- specific national histories – e.g. political change dovetailing with the interests and policies of the nation state,
- academic capacities, researches and priorities in relation to other disciplines – manifested in well-prepared or well-thought out courses in some programs while for others, the programs and courses are still in infancy stage.
- availability of personnel – certain countries already have a strong Ph.D. base; while others are still in the process of training and spotting undergraduates interested in Southeast Asia. There are variations in existing personnel with some tension or dynamics between foreign-trained scholars and local scholars; and
- varying levels of public interest in particular countries – e.g., a noticeable phenomenon in China or Japan but low in others.

The participating institutions also differed in their priorities with most placing a strong emphasis in undergraduate training as part of disciplinary requirements while others combined research and teaching.

Still others have had to grapple with whether or not it is important to address academic objectives or pragmatic policy concerns.

What was also remarkable from the conference findings were the similarities in terms of problems confronted and opportunities faced, some of which are listed here:

- the aspiration to promote further institutionalization of Southeast Asian studies in their respective universities;
- the desire to improve dialogue among scholars across national and regional boundaries, in part by enhancing translation and learning of each other's languages; recognizing that there already are existing materials both formal or informal) to facilitate such contacts.
- a strong interest in sharing resources and information (e.g. fellowships, MA curricula, etc.);
- agreement that for Southeast Asian studies to flourish, it should not simply be a strictly academic endeavor but must also involve sectors outside the academe (business, NGOs, policy-makers, etc.); and
- awareness of the need for comparative and /or a multidisciplinary approach as well as an interest in both the historical and the contemporary.

Alternative Approaches to Southeast Asian Studies

Many issues were raised during the course of the discussions that could impact on the future directions of Southeast Asian Studies in Asia. A persistent question was its rationale and place as an academic program in the context of growing nationalisms in the countries of Southeast Asia even as the state of the art continues to be dominated by the concerns and interests of the former colonial powers. It was also noted that many of the Southeast Asianists in the region, past and present, were trained in the West, a fact that may have affected the development of the field in the

region. Are the questions that we seek to address our own questions or those of others?

Moreover, it was observed that there is much unevenness in the teaching of Southeast Asian studies across the region. There was an expressed need for more thematic or comparative cross-country studies, e.g. ethnicity and religion, and conflicts arising from them that need to be addressed. In addition, the inclusion of studies on gender was strongly recommended. These meant that Southeast Asian studies must not limit its scope to country studies alone, but must address contemporary issues as they cut across countries on a comparative basis. One participant pointed out how country studies are good topics for research but not for teaching.

In both teaching and research, the question of creating a balance between pragmatic and utilitarian interests such as catering to the requirements of government and business interests vis-à-vis the need to develop a core of faculty and research scholars with multidisciplinary expertise was raised. One suggested approach to multidisciplinary research was to encourage more team teaching and collaborative research. Another key issue that was brought up was whether Southeast Asian studies is best approached as “area studies” or from a disciplinary perspective.

Similarly, the question was raised whether focusing on country studies helps better one’s understanding and appreciation of Southeast Asia as a whole.

Workshop Reflections: Lessons and Prospects for Southeast Asian Studies

The state of the field, especially in Southeast Asian universities, is still very backward in general. While there are SEA-related courses taught in different departments and faculties and at different levels, these are quite few and formal. Moreover, many so-called Southeast Asianists in the region have little claim to expertise on any country in the region other than their own.

The participants agreed that the importance of Southeast Asian Studies in East and Southeast Asia would grow in light of the weak prospects and declining interest in Southeast Asian Studies in North America and Europe. The increasing linkages among countries and peoples of the region also drive the need for more programs that will enable the expansion of mutual understanding and cooperation.

The workshop discussions emphasized the importance of this field of study especially in the region, of integrating teaching with research, theory with practical applications, and of developing indigenous perspectives. Language and culture are very important elements of Southeast Asian studies, but there are new emerging issues that also merit attention, e.g. gender, environment and the economy.

The workshop addressed the question: what should be the objectives of teaching Southeast Asian studies in the region in the next ten years? Participants noted three main objectives: 1) the need to answer questions of people from within the region, 2) to expand knowledge of our neighboring countries and peoples in order to promote mutual understanding and cooperation, and 3) to develop multiple perspectives and theoretical breakthroughs in the study of the region. These goals recognize the importance of the global and regional environment as well as our consciousness of a shared colonial legacy and shared destiny. We need alternative understandings of the region as distinguished from the perceptions that have been framed by outside observers and colonial scholarship.

Most workshop participants felt that Southeast Asian studies is best taught at the graduate level. At this level, students have had some orientation in the disciplines, and would be more prepared to pursue comparative studies, eventually moving on to further knowledge on Southeast Asia, since teaching programs in the region inevitably have to involve more complex interdisciplinary work. However, there are varied sources of demand directed at multiple audiences – students at the undergraduate and graduate levels, practitioners from the private and public

sectors and regional and international organizations, among others. The pooling of teaching resources, developing student exchanges and expanding fieldwork opportunities were some of the proposals aimed at improving the quality of instruction.

The workshop discussed an agenda for research and publications on Southeast Asian studies in the next ten years. Comparative studies on many issues should be undertaken, including, among others, urgent questions affecting peace and security in the region, maritime concerns, flows of people, the impact of globalization on traditional cultures and communities, environment and labor concerns.

The conference-workshop endorsed the formation of an association of scholars in Asia who study Southeast Asia, beginning with a preparatory committee composed of participants of the current conference-workshop. Possible initial projects include producing directories of individual scholars and networks, as well as inventories of current researches (including books, dissertations, theses). The network, and later the Association, can help promote exchanges among academics and extend support for students.

Other proposals by the participants were as follows:

- Hold a workshop on the development of common core courses that can be shared among universities in the region (e.g. Introduction to Southeast Asian Studies, Theories and Methods in Southeast Asian Studies, Southeast Asian civilizations);
- Develop syllabi on Southeast Asian studies that can be made public domain;
- Translate reference materials and link up with existing translation projects such as that of Kyoto University's Center for Southeast Asian Studies;
- Gather some of the existing research papers across the region into a publication series or journal, editing and publication of which can be rotated among various institutions on a voluntary basis.

- Share directories, resource materials, curricula, syllabi, funding opportunities and information on activities, projects, etc. of various individual scholars and institutions on the Internet; and
- Organize research dissemination conferences and workshops for young and old scholars of the region who do work on similar issues and publish results in existing local journals and via the Internet.

Finally, this need for and desirability of promoting collaboration in Southeast Asian studies was encapsulated in a vision statement contributed by participant Francis Loh Kok-Wah, to wit:

“While the notion of ‘Southeast Asia’ was created in the West, we now wish to take responsibility for ‘Southeast Asia’ as scholars, by recreating and critiquing it particularly with regards to preparing future generations of scholars who look upon the region in comparative and regional terms.”