

FIFTY YEARS OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES IN MALAYSIA: NAVIGATING PEDAGOGIES, PERSPECTIVES AND PRACTICES

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Abstract

The article discusses the development of Southeast Asian Studies or more broadly area studies in Malaysia through the lens of the Department of Southeast Asian Studies at the Universiti Malaya. The experiences and trajectories of the department as a pioneer institute in the region offering a degree program in Southeast Asian Studies merits a close analysis. Through the intersections of pedagogies, perspectives and practices implemented by the Department of Southeast Asian Studies, the article delineates key achievements and challenges for area studies, both at the national and regional levels. The article concludes with some observations to move area studies forward, suggesting a region-plus framework that embraces existing and emerging subregions in the region and wider East and South Asian regions.

Keywords: *Southeast Asian Studies, Malaysia, Department of Southeast Asian Studies, pedagogy, perspective, practice*

INTRODUCTION

The Southeast Asian Studies (SEAS) program in Malaysia, established after the ASEAN Declaration of 1971, is a pioneer institute focusing on the teaching of Southeast Asian Studies in the region. The program, otherwise known as area studies, was established in 1975 and turned 50 this year (1975-2025). Over its 50-year lifespan, of which I have been a part of for the last two decades, the department has steadily increased its student numbers, introduced new postgraduate programs as well as embarked on numerous cycles of curriculum reviews. It has witnessed many achievements ranging from growth in international student intake to multi-disciplined research produced by its faculty

and postgraduates, while also faced with challenges demanding justifications for its existence and calls for its merger with other departments. The resilience of the program despite the challenges owes largely to its curriculum content and the marketability of a degree that produces graduates with multi discipline knowledge on Southeast Asia.

This article traces the development of area studies in Malaysia through the intersections of, pedagogies, perspectives and practices pursued by the Department of Southeast Asian Studies, Universiti Malaya (UM) where the program of Southeast Asian Studies is firmly anchored. It began as a cross departmental program, where courses offered by discipline-based departments such as geography, history, anthropology and languages were listed and offered under the Bachelor of Arts (BA) in Southeast Asian Studies program, with teaching staff comprising members from these various departments. It was a functional arrangement that, in a way, truly reflected multi disciplines coming together to offer the BA in Southeast Asian Studies program. In 1979, the program became a separate department under the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, UM.

PEDAGOGY

Primacy of the Nation: From Colonial to National Discourse

The BA in SEAS program in its early years focused on understanding the region through the lens of country and discipline. These two basic units required students to undertake courses “regarding one or more of the Southeast Asian countries and at least three courses of multi-disciplinary approach regarding the study of this area” (*Minutes of the Senate Meeting, 908 [13], 1975*). Three disciplines, namely culture, social and development were identified. The section on culture incorporated languages, literature, art, folklore and systems of traditional beliefs. Whereas social category included topics such as social structure, customs, change and employment. The final disciplinary thrust focused on development aspects that included modernisation, urbanisation, economic development and political changes. Hence, from the onset, the region’s diverse culture, social aspects and development trajectories became the cornerstone of the BA program.

Most of the existing courses on culture offered by the English Department, Indian and Chinese Studies Departments as well as Malay Studies Department in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences then were made available to students pursuing the BA in Southeast Asia Studies. These cross-department courses that pioneer students in the department undertook reflected a truly multi discipline slant. For country-based studies, courses included History of Modern Vietnam, Philippines History, Burmese History and Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei. Apart

from country-specific courses, general courses on Southeast Asia such as Political Modernisation in Southeast Asia, Agriculture and Natural Resources Development in Southeast Asia and Comparative Politics and Government were offered. Courses specifically covering mainland and island Southeast Asia were also part of the early curriculum. The medium of instruction was bilingual, with some courses taught in English, while others were taught in the Malay language. Subsequently, in the 1980s, the curriculum expanded to include courses relating to foreign policy, urban-rural sociology and macro and micro economics, focusing on nation building and development in Southeast Asia (*Buku Panduan, Rancangan Pengajian Asia Tenggara, 1980/81, 1980*).

From National to Trans Nation

In the 1990s, courses in the department covered a wider content and geographic scope. The broadening membership of Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries that included upper mainland southeast Asian countries (CLMV- Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Vietnam) and its dialogue partners, specifically China, Japan and Korea led to the introduction of new courses such as ASEAN and Regionalism in Southeast Asia, and ASEAN Identity and Development, capturing the contemporaneous economic and security developments in the region. Incidentally, the development in area studies in China in this period also began to extend beyond Nanyang Studies (Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia) (Xie, 2021; Yu, 2022). This triggered greater interest in the culture and politics of Southeast Asia, prompting students from China to choose Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia to pursue their postgraduate studies.

From the 2000s, the program engaged with contemporary themes and concerns that included ethnic minorities, maritime communities, tourism, labour and environmental sustainability. Courses such as Minorities of Southeast Asia, Labour Markets in Southeast Asia and Ocean Governance in Southeast Asia became part of the curriculum. But the focal point of the department in the last decade has been engaging with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Each course in the department is matched with one or more of the 17 SDGs, reflecting the department's continued engagement with global standards as well as lending to the resilience of the program.

Another core element of the SEAS program is the teaching of other national languages of Southeast Asia, implemented since the founding days of the program and continued to be practiced to date. At present, undergraduates not only learn a Southeast Asian language in Malaysia but can learn and immerse in the culture of the people of that language through short transfer programs to countries in the region. Students learning Thai in Malaysia can opt for a short

exchange program to a Thai university and continue learning Thai there. The experience of learning the language in the native environment enhances not only language proficiency but also appreciation and first-hand knowledge of the culture of that country. Students on exchange programs to universities in Korea and Japan either continue their Southeast Asian language learning, if offered in those universities, or opt for basic Japanese or Korean language learning. This too adds value to their degree in Southeast Asian Studies as proficiency in another language enhances the student's job prospects especially since Japanese and Korean investment and companies in Southeast Asia is significant.

Meanwhile, student enrolment in the program has been growing steadily. In 2021, the BA program had a total of 34 students enrolled, with 2 foreign students from China and Indonesia. By 2025, the figures rose to 61 students, with 1 foreign student from Brunei (Southeast Asian Studies Department records, 2021, 2025). Simultaneously, increasing inbound exchange or transfer students from universities worldwide (otherwise known as mobility programs) led to numerous departmental courses offered as electives and taught in English. Courses such as Social Movements in Southeast Asia, Social Entrepreneurship in Southeast Asia and Political Development in Southeast Asia attract huge interest among mobility students.

RESEARCH THEMES

Scholars in the department are mostly trained in disciplines such as history, cultural studies, sociology, political science, economics and geography, hence, research produced by them reflects largely their professional training. Collaboration between colleagues in the department and their counterparts in the region as well as with the growing pool of postgraduates have in turn contributed to a diverse range of studies covering inter disciplinary topics.

From the early dissertations related to colonial economic policies, rural and agricultural development as well as cultural studies, were added topics focusing on maritime economy, fisheries, environment, cross border trade and territorial disputes. Most of the research focused on Malaysia and maritime Southeast Asia, specifically the region of Borneo. In the 1990s and 2000s, research trends inclined towards studying topics such as labour and foreign workforce in the region, migration and refugee studies, sustainable practices in culture and environment, youth and social movements, human rights, political reform and higher education. Most of the studies focused on Malaysia or Malaysia and a neighbouring country. The latter, known as the country plus approach, a term coined by researchers from the Southeast Asian Studies Regional Exchange

Program (SEASREP) Foundation, refers to the study of a neighbouring country in addition to one's own country (Diokno, 2025a).

There was also growth in comparative research, that included two or more countries or borders and subregions. A comparison between national language education in Malaysia and Thailand and cross border trade and cooperation between Sarawak and Brunei, Malaysia and Indonesia fall under this category. More recent research included studies focused on youth, the elderly and disabled, gender and community studies including local community history such as the Kerinchi Malays in Kuala Lumpur and Siamese in north Malaysia. There is also a strong inclination towards studies exploring issues related to non-traditional security threats such as climate change, natural disasters, human vulnerability including migrants and refugees as well as digital and precarity economies. One such dissertation looks at digital nomadism in Bali, Indonesia. There are studies on Rohingya and Chin refugees as well as dissertations on Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Indian and Filipino migrant workers in Malaysia. The latter often covers narratives of the home and host countries. Another phenomenon is the growing interest in topics related to blue economy, maritime governance, as well as those related to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), focusing on infrastructure and financial investment. These are very popular among postgraduates from China and Indonesia, pursuing their Master of Arts (MA) and Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) studies in the Department of Southeast Asian Studies. A comparative study investigating China's investment in the construction sector in Southeast Asia and regional ocean governance in the ASEAN region reflects this trend.

An aberration to the development above is the growing shift or return to ethnographic studies, also noted among postgraduates from China. Studies investigating religious and ritual practices among ethnic and minority communities in the region have gained much attention from non-citizen students. These include a study focusing on the practices of worshippers of the Goddess *Mariamman* in Kuala Lumpur and another focusing on the ritual practices of the Bissu in Sulawesi, both undertaken by Chinese nationals registered for the MA program in the Department of Southeast Asian Studies.

Moving forward, topics emphasising grassroots over national areas involving activism and synergy between indigenous communities and local civil society organisations resisting state and international capitalists can significantly shape the study of the region. Duara (2025) demonstrates that the study of sub-national units such as the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), within the context of economic and political communities, can create pathways to new cosmopolitanism in the region. The shift towards a cosmopolitan perspective clearly negates methodological nationalism in area studies research.

PERSPECTIVES

Approaches on area studies in Malaysia evolved from country focus to country plus and comparative studies. However, the territorial scope has remained largely on island or maritime Southeast Asia, since its founding days (Tunku Shamsul Bahrin, 1981, p. 101). Expertise on mainland Southeast Asian countries, except for Thailand, and dissertations relating to Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia are rare.

The dissertations produced in the department are empirically rich but lack theoretical engagement. There have been many debates, discussing if theory is really a benchmark for good scholarship. The general practice in the 1980s-early 1990s was to distance from theory, especially as these were seen as Euro-centric, and instead focus on empirical data and analysis guided by local particularism, or “traitism”, in the words of Chua et al. (2019). This approach coincided with the global decolonial, and subaltern turns, popular during that time. The department’s focus on local particularisms has enabled grounded knowledge and perspectives from the region.

Added to this were the ‘insider knows best’ inclination (or the scholar-citizen syndrome). This approach did not encourage much scholarly debate on Southeast Asia/n Studies in the region, leading to interpretations of the field being ‘less robust’ in the region, (Andaya, 2017; Hussin & Sathian 2018, p. 8). As I have argued elsewhere, research and publications from the region written in national languages (Malay, Thai, Japanese, etc.) rather than English, hence limiting their wider reach, is one reason for this perception (Sathian, 2022; Kono et al., 2019). There are certainly much scholarly writings, research and discussion on Southeast Asian Studies, going by the number of journals published about Southeast Asia in the region, in national, English or bilingual languages. There are at least 45 journals on Southeast Asia published in the region (see Diokno [2025a]). Of these, *JATI - Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* produced by the Department of Southeast Asian Studies, UM since 1995, remains a primary outlet for publication on research about the region.

The International Conference on Southeast Asia (ICONSEA), a biennial international conference organised by the department since 2005 is yet another platform that reveals the perspectives of area studies in Malaysia. The conference themes have engaged in various key issues facing area studies regionally. Among these include the resilience of the program centred on issues and debates about recentering, sustaining, rebranding and recovering Southeast Asian Studies. These themes indicate that the development of SEAS is a nonlinear phenomenon, and like the American and European Southeast Asian Studies Centres, SEAS centres in the region too have their ups and downs, with crises of funding, mergers and

downsizing. Nonetheless, the demand for the program in the region has only moved upwards, hence there are almost 144 centres offering programs related to SEAS in the region in 2025, compared to a handful in the 1970s and 80s (Diokno, 2025a).

Introducing innovative courses and area studies programs is moving with the times especially in catering to a more inclusive yet diverse/new areas of interest. In Vietnam, for instance, a course on public health is taught at the undergraduate level. The value of this course in the post COVID-19 period cannot be overlooked (see Diokno [2025a] for a list of courses offered by Southeast Asian Studies programs in universities in the region). At UM, under the revised curriculum for the BA in SEAS program, new electives include a course on philanthropy in Southeast Asia and another that focuses on the gig and precarity economy in the region.

A less narrow perspective of geographic cum discipline scope within area studies can enhance the field. A study focusing on Bangladeshi foreign workers in Malaysia covers both the regions of Malaysia (Southeast Asia) and Bangladesh (South Asia) or a study on democratic movements in Thailand and Myanmar, inspired by the youth movements in Taiwan and Hong Kong, leading to the Milk Tea Alliance, covers a wider trans-region geographic focus. In such scenarios, the topic of research, for example on foreign workers and youth movements are better identified with disciplines such as economics, sociology and politics within a wider geographical scope, hence allowing for a discipline cum region-plus framework. The country plus model, if extended or complemented with a region plus model can enhance inter-Asia referencing and dialogue. Indeed, the 'Asia as Method' approach has empowered area studies leading to critical reassessment of curriculum and practice of the field (Chen, 2010).

While there have been calls for a "new area studies," advocating the transformation of area studies into a discipline, there are also alternative ways for the field to move beyond its Western-centric origins and the tendency to frame itself as a victim of these approaches (Houben et al., 2020). To display agency in shaping the path of knowledge on the region, Southeast Asian Studies should develop a theoretical core originating from concepts and ideas local or indigenous to the region. Diokno (2025b), in her keynote address for the 11th ICONSEA Conference in Kuala Lumpur, claimed that the issue of Southeast Asian Studies becoming a discipline is less urgent compared to the field developing a strong theoretical foundation based on local or indigenous concepts. In addition to terms like mandala, galactic polity and zomia that have strong relevance in Southeast Asian contexts, Diokno (2025b) singled out the concept of *kapatid* (fellow countrymen or siblings) used among Filipinos most notably in reference to the

Philippines Revolution as a concept that reflects loyalty, solidarity, identity and love of the country. More widely it reflects Filipino/Southeast Asian cultural and political ethos. Local terms such as *kapatid* and *umat* (Malay: brotherhood) can be basis for understanding political culture in Southeast Asia.

WHAT CAN SEAS CONTRIBUTE FOR MALAYSIA AND THE REGION?

Area studies in Southeast Asia are exclusively teaching and research outfits. While it allows for autonomy and focus, its significance remains within the confines of the academe. They have not developed into research or policy think tanks for governments or industry. This is largely done by established think tanks such as the ISEAS - Yusof Ishak Institute (Singapore), Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) and Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations (IDFR) (Malaysia) and National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN) (Indonesia). In fact, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) have become partners for policy input and recommendation. The lack of market value of research that is coming out of area studies reflects a disconnect between research/empirical data and policy implication (applied value).

In China, according to Xie (2021), the 'policy turn' shifted research paradigms in area studies. However, exponential growth in policy related studies on Southeast Asia or tying up area studies with diplomacy or state interests, may not necessarily have a neutral impact on the growth of area studies (Cheng & Liu, 2023). Short term policy research produced quickly to meet the demands of policy makers might be less thorough or lacking depth in terms of the subject of study. Conversely, in my own department, for example, scholars have conducted research on poverty among fisher folk, landholdings among the Federal Land Development Authority (FELDA) scheme settlers as well as conservation of the arts and heritage through consultation and collaboration with government and non-state agencies. These have big policy implications.

Meanwhile, new regional developments and the changing international geopolitical realities provide ample space for the relevance and growth of area studies. China's economic and political strengths, India's Act East Policy, directed at engaging with Southeast Asia, among others, indirectly create demands for area studies scholarship both in the region and beyond. Growing numbers of international academic conferences on Asia/Southeast Asia Studies held in Asia/Southeast Asia is yet another emerging trend for engagement with the region. In the past few years, the Association for Asian Studies (AAS) and Association of Southeast Asian Studies in the UK (ASEASUK) have been organising conferences in venues like Yogyakarta and Surabaya in Southeast Asia and Korea and Nepal in

Asia. At the same time, centres of SEAS in Korea (Busan University of Foreign Studies [BUFS] and Sogang University) and Taiwan (National Chengchi University and Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages) have been organising their own regular international conferences on Southeast Asia.

The Universiti Malaya and the National University of Singapore (NUS)'s SEAS programs resemble the 'traditional' model of area studies, largely shaped by the northern European model. Other newer programs in the region offer, for example, a wider selection of languages. Some programs focus on ASEAN, while others retained colonial binaries such as Vietnam (occidental-oriental binary). For SEAS in UM, the program has given coherence to the transformations taking place in the region while promoting inter-connectedness and understanding of the Southeast Asian self. In sum, the strengths of the program are evident through consistent student demand for the BA in SEAS program and the growing student enrolments for the MA in SEAS program, the latter mostly from foreign students, as well as a clear progression from introductory to more advanced and specialised topics in the courses offered within a politics-economy-culture wide structure.

The future of SEAS is in Southeast Asian hands. Intergenerational study comparing scholars in SEAS centres in the region; from pioneers to second and present generations may be one approach to understand how SEAS has moved beyond its origins. Developing and engaging with concepts from the region will essentially provide a basis for theorising in SEAS. Perhaps over time, with more graduates with SEAS qualifications employed as faculty and researchers, there is likelihood that new understandings of area studies may emerge.

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