

Transnational History and ASEAN's Young Scholars

in Regional Connectivity: Perspectives from Mainland Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Past legacies profoundly shape contemporary relationships between ASEAN's countries. Unfortunately, voices of history do not always generate a healthy motivation for regional connectivity, but recall painful images of warfare and conflict between polities that developed into present-day Southeast Asian nation-states. Such histories can be seen in ongoing disputes over the South China Sea, or at a temple on the Thai-Cambodian border. Taking countries in mainland Southeast Asia as a case study, this paper explores the role history education and Southeast Asian studies play in managing past legacy and facilitating the ASEAN Community with a particular focus on the integration of regional young scholars. It argues that ASEAN's connection cannot be achieved unless a sense of sharing history and culture is built up among its citizens and the pioneering responsibility falls to a new scholarly generation who are the future key players in bridging that river of mistrust and hostility.

Keywords *Transnational History, Nationalist Historiography, Nationalism, History Education, ASEAN Community, Southeast Asian Studies*

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Introduction

This paper examines the new epistemological production of Southeast Asian studies through the emergence of a young generation of scholars coming from the region, who are standing at the crossroads of the area and global studies. Taking the historical legacy of mainland Southeast Asia as a departure point, it investigates the role teaching history plays in shaping and sharing knowledge promoting regional connection, and corresponding to the ASEAN projection of regionalism. While the heritage of the past continues to have profound implications in contemporary relationships among countries in ASEAN, those historical voices sometimes do not generate a healthy air for regional connectivity, but instead, result in unpleasant images of conflict and dispute among ethnicities and political polities in the region. Such living history is embodied in the political discourse found in on-going disputes over the sea and land across Southeast Asia, as well as in the way national history is being taught or narrated.

For the ASEAN community, managing the past heritage to facilitate a regional perspective of sharing history and culture becomes essential for any design of regionalism. The emerging academic dialogue among young local scholars certainly owns a pioneering responsibility to construct a bridge across the river of mistrust and hostility. This paper suggests that by promoting transboundary education and intercultural and cross-national networks, ASEAN's young scholarship creates a common intellectual ground for illuminating regional diversity of histories and cultures. In doing so, this paper proposes that scholars on the mainland are required to go beyond nationalist conventions of teaching and writing history with nationalistic pride. The making of the young scholarship network and integrating knowledge within the area are vital in promoting mutual understanding and producing a transnational version of regional history. The phenomenon not only promotes the rise of the local voices but also creates an atmosphere to reach beyond conventional Western approaches to understand Southeast Asia and create a new epistemology of Southeast Asia from a non-Western-centric perspective.

Southeast Asian History at the Crossroad of Area and Global Studies

Area studies have entered a new fate across the world of academia. In fact, the emerging global and international studies have profoundly reshaped the state of the field and lead to a general belief that area studies are in a crisis (Huat et al., 2019). Not only facing "the crisis of legitimacy," its struggle expands to new demands of rebuilding its structure, research methodologies, and geographical interest. In response, enormous scholarly efforts have invested to transform area studies by integrating different academic disciplines, or deploying interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, transnational, and global approaches. In Southeast Asia, local scholars now take a new role to play that aims to replace Western long-held domination of the field and produce new epistemological underpinning in promoting new understanding within the region.

By the 1990s, the global geopolitical shift generated tremendous impacts on the prospect of area studies in general and Southeast Asian studies in particular, and for the first time, challenging the validity of the field as an "authentic" scientific subject and epistemological foundation. Like other area studies subjects, giving birth after World War II and as a result of the Cold War and global geopolitics, Southeast Asian studies ultimately reflected the US concern toward the region neither academic nor historical and cultural interest at first hand, but political interest. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of ideological divergence

have significantly reshaped the superpower's global strategy. This worldwide phenomenon during the last three decades has laid a new intellectual landscape for reconfiguring area studies with both challenges and opportunities. To mark the phenomenon, social scientists have developed a couple of bold themes, such as the "End of History" and "The World is Flat" to illuminate globalization as an overwhelming economic and cultural force under which the world is increasingly becoming similar rather than regional differentiation (Fukuyama, 2006; Friedman, 2007; 2012).

Consequently, there is an ongoing debate in Europe and Northern America bringing the existence of Southeast Asian Studies under the spotlight of critique. It stresses the argument that there is no need to launch or maintain research institutes and programs specifically dedicated to Vietnamese studies, Thai studies or Southeast studies in general because of their newly established role under the global studies umbrella. In addition, in terms of the theoretical framework and methodological approach, Southeast Asian studies are in a crisis because they failed to produce "a synthesis of knowledge that transcends disciplinary divides and power hierarchies between the Western and non-Western academia." (Goh Beng-Lan, 2011:1).

Is it the time for Southeast Asian studies to step back from the old academic paradigm to hold a less significant position within the institution of international and global studies? The answer is highly likely not the case. History is not yet to be "ended," or more accurately, did not finish in the scenario that was expected by the West. Political upheaval across the globe in the post-Cold War poses new challenges for reconstructing different bodies of human knowledge geographically. Following the Gulf War (1990-1991) there was a spectre of antagonism that was described by many between some Western countries and the Muslim World, and most recently, the September 11th attack and global war against terrorism (GWOT). These new forms of conflict had the effect of making clear that there are cultural differences so fundamental that they lead to split up human society and probably lead to new kinds of quarrel globally (Houben, 2010). The most direct impact of those phenomena on academic shift, of course, is the re-focus on area studies, first and foremost with the concentration on Islamic studies. In a broader sense of intellectual institution, Southeast Asian studies can demonstrate its validity of knowledge production in a world not only becoming similar but also differentiated across regions, religions and cultures.

The coming back of Orientalism's critique and "Clash of Civilizations" discourse challenged the conventional perception and structure of area studies and led to a new configuration of the field in the post-Cold War and globalization context (Said, 2005; Huntington, 2007). Southeast Asian Studies now engages with a new era that due to emerging intellectual institutions of international studies across the world has to find other scholarly motivations upon the region itself. In its birthplace of Northern America, the scale of the field has declined dramatically and is becoming a sub-subject of trans-regional and globalization studies. At the same time and more intriguingly, another phenomenon has spectacularly occurred in Southeast Asia with the establishment of various centres, institutions and programs for Southeast Asian Studies run by local Southeast Asians who are expecting to replace the dominant role Western scholarship played during the last five decades. The consequence is, to geographically relocate focus on Southeast Asia to the region itself and anchor itself in local hands. It is the time for Southeast Asians to take responsibility for the subject of their reflection upon their region.

The campaign for decentering Southeast Asian Studies is not a unique phenomenon which is widely spreading in Asian scholarship. Among renowned advocates is the Taiwanese Kuan-Hsing Chen who recently called for critical intellectual thinking to use “Asia as Method” to decolonize and de-imperialize the production of knowledge in the post-Cold War (Chen, 2010:1-16). In Japan, the recent focus of the field is under reorientation to create “new perspectives for the global future based on the reality, knowledge and experiences of the region.” (Yasuyuki, 2014). These directions accelerate wider collaboration between various disciplines and fields of research to debunk the method and perspective of generating knowledge using either Cold War points of view or competing nationalism. To build a new structure for regional history and culture, it is necessary to acknowledge different connected, integrated, overlapping and contesting pasts long before national sentiments distance themselves from others. Therefore, the call for using the “Southeast Asian method” is not an ultimate response to changing institutional politics but comes at a time when a regional perspective is seeking ground in defining the region.

This paper argues for a new direction of doing Southeast Asian history in the context of ASEAN and globalization. By accelerating the network of young scholars in creating new approaches and knowledge production that not only reaches beyond conventional ideological differences and national boundaries but also characterizes a regional pattern of epistemology. The development of the field in Southeast Asia is parallel with the emergence of regionalism under the facility of ASEAN. The organization acts as a regional hub for not only political and economic integration but also academic and cultural. Southeast Asian studies emerging from such local perspectives have the capacity as a connected device for people across the region by producing mutual understanding and sharing knowledge among peoples crossing cultures, borderlines and religions. The regional context of knowledge production places new challenges on history education at the national level. Historically-related issues are among the major causes of countries’ hostility. The promotion of regional interaction, therefore, is hoped to strengthen new forms of educating Southeast Asian history by providing it with an academic and cultural foundation and bridging mistrust and antagonism towards the facilitation of ASEAN connectivity.

Southeast Asian Studies in Southeast Asia

Decentralized Southeast Asian Studies created a more diverse intellectual landscape for local Southeast Asianists to engage with the subject that focuses on their region. In contrast to the decline witnessed across Europe and America, the dynamic development of the field in Southeast Asia provides energetic academic motivation. This phenomenon transforms the epistemological foundation of Southeast Asian studies globally by shifting the centers toward Southeast Asia and being conducted by Southeast Asians. Relocating knowledge production back to the region itself opens new prospects in which area studies enjoy the local environment and are exposed to local interest. Such development debunks the long-going debate on the binary view of “outside versus inside” in Southeast Asian Studies that has been around since the 1950s when a Dutch scholar made his renowned critique that Southeast Asia was being viewed from “the deck of the ship, the ramparts of the fortress, the high gallery of the trading house” (van Leur, 1955:261). Such epistemological inquiry has repeatedly appeared over generations of scholarship in Southeast Asian Studies and has been continuously propelling more efforts to accelerate local contribution in producing concepts and indigenous representations.

The rapid change of the academic landscape in the region produces a new underpinning and epistemological framework for the establishment of a “localized institution” of area studies. Leading universities in Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam are running several world-class centers for Southeast Asian Studies and taking responsibility for replacing those of the outside where their ultimate interest in Southeast Asia likely retreats to the Arab world, China, Russia, Eastern Europe or Southern America. There are many to be named: National University of Singapore (NUS), Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, University of Malaya, Malaysia (UM), Chulalongkorn University, Thammasat University (Thailand), and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (Vietnam) are playing a pioneering role for conducting research and offering a training program for scholars and students across the region.

Since their establishment, ISEAS (Singapore, 1971) and the Southeast Asian Studies Regional Exchange Program (SEASREP, 1994) have made vibrant intellectual exchange both within and outside the region possible. Attempts to promote academic interaction are enormously assisting the vision of one ASEAN because at first, it allows intellectual communities in different countries the chance to integrate. Therefore, area studies developing locally are extremely significant more than ever before, not only for academic augmentation in each country but for the region as a whole in diversifying and reorienting regional knowledge as part of a wider cooperation project.

Thailand, located in the heart of the mainland has a geographically strategic advantage to the institute as a hub of area studies, especially in the Mekong countries. The region has a long history of interaction between ethnicity, cultures, kingdoms, colonial empires, and nation-states. Their rich cultural heritage and historical legacy are an essential part of regionalization under which every nation plays an equally crucial role in building regional conception. Chulalongkorn University and Thammasat University are among the pioneers in providing area studies as research units and academic subjects, and by that able to offer an MA program in Southeast Asian Studies (at Chulalongkorn University), MA program in ASEAN Studies (Prithi Banomyong International College, Thammasat University), and various language training courses. With the support provided by international foundations, governmental organizations, and universities (Rockefeller Foundation, Kyoto University...) scholarships and opportunities are available for Southeast Asians approaching the field in their region. The Southeast Asia Studies Program at Chulalongkorn University, for instance, during the last ten years, has graduated quite several students, those who come both from within and outside the region to pursue master's studies, and many continue to do so in a larger academic network across the world for further engagement with the field.

A new generation of local scholars is emerging, who involve themselves variously with academic training both in Europe, Northern America, Australia and region-based institutions and are expected to diversify the state of the field. They are taking responsibility not only for challenging established knowledge created by the Western-centric approach used for centuries but also for raising “local” voices in the global context. The future of the field is beyond doubt going to fall into the hands of those whose integrated viewpoint would place the region as a major hub of the global academic landscape (King, 2006:38-39). The diverse group that is engaging with Southeast Asian Studies is also added to by many tracing their original linkages to the region. In the case of Vietnamese studies, for instance, Vietnamese

overseas in the US and Australia are playing an increasing role in the flourishing of the field, and bridging scholars in Vietnam and outside (Zinoman, 2003:295-307).

The growth of a region-based body of scholarship has the advantage of enduring discussion over “insider” and “outsider,” between the West and East in Southeast Asian Studies. Local Southeast Asianists also have great pride in their linguistic skill and familiarity with the social and political circumstances in which their research is conducted. They are not only expected to go beyond the Western approach of area studies or global studies but more importantly, to develop a new theoretical framework and approach for Southeast Asia itself beyond the Euro-American models. Some are anticipating such an epistemological underpinning as the “theory of the Global South.” (Rehbein, 2010). However, the sense of being “local” also creates its challenges, among those are neo-nationalist campaigns that in many cases bound the scholarly capacity to cross national and ethnic frontiers of political memory, as I will suggest in some detail below.

The ASEAN facilitation of communication and cooperation opens a new landscape for Southeast Asian Studies to flourish in the region. The ultimate goals of studying Southeast Asia have been shifting, not because of the need for building a colonial empire, Cold War policy or other outsider interests but to understand the region itself and to support the need for internal connectivity. Training programs and research agendas across the region also diversify conventional topics of the field. Among those, one significant mission is to help peoples in the region overcome competing historical legacies that maintain contention between regionalism and nationalism. National conflict, mistrustful stereotypes, antagonism, and territorial disputes offer all sorts of obstacles and erect cultural and political barriers among the peoples of Thailand, Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The past is living among the present and preventing the future from mutual recognition among those groups.

To overcome a such challenge, it is time for Southeast Asian studies to revise some conventional assumptions and beliefs concerning the contemporary body of knowledge produced by Southeast Asians themselves. In Thai studies for example, Thongchai Winichakul once suggested that it is not the case that Thai people lack knowledge of the other, but the way they portray neighbors in history is variously biased and egocentric (Winichakul, 2005). Obviously in the mainland, ethnic penetration and political interaction have been shaped for millennia, and become a way of generating indigenous knowledge and perceptions of each other. However, local comprehension is not necessary to fall in line with the modern Western category of “area studies” and therefore has been neglected by Western academic recognition. Consequently, to the paradigm of Southeast Asian Studies we are developing in the region, those bodies of knowledge should be widely recognized and developed in the new context of regional integration rather than being isolated and antagonistic.

Sharing History: Legacies of the Past and Intercultural Dialogue

Legacy of the past is fundamental in shaping contemporary Southeast Asian knowledge and perceptions under which Southeast Asians self-imagine and portray each other. The politics of collective memory, competing nationalist narrative and colonial/imperial knowledge add biased reflection and unfriendly images of the neighbors. Those are significant obstacles to regional connectivity that prevent people from crossing over to different cultures,

histories and nations. Neighborhood in mainland Southeast Asia is characterized by much complexity of pride and prejudice. Nationalism versus regionalism has become popularized along with national-building and remains a major obstacle on the way to ASEAN's "one community, one destiny" (theme of the ASEAN Summit 2012, Cambodia). The field of knowledge in Southeast Asia is bounded by a general belief that people within are not ultimately interested in knowing their neighbors but the outside. Thai historian Chanvit Kasetseri points out the situation where Thais are likely Western-oriented when it comes to their attitude toward European and American societies. He employs a proverb that goes, "Klai klua kin dang" [Next to the salt, but take in the lime] to express the low-interest Thai owe to their immediate neighbors (Kasetsiri et al., 1995:9). The saying is metaphorically identical to that of Vietnamese, "But chua nha khong thieng" [Gods of the local temple are not miraculous (comparing to those outside)], to indicate the same level of neglect that distance that exists between Vietnam and Southeast Asian countries while glamorizing idealized models and values of the exotic.

As nationalist historiography is dominating our intellectual environment, media and journals are preoccupied with bias in daily expression and it causes misperceptions of other behavior and hostile attitudes toward the "historical debt" of invasion, territorial annexation and massacre. Disputes over a temple along the Thai-Cambodian border led to the burning of the Thai Embassy in Phnom Penh in 2003. Since then, the Cambodian neo-nationalist movement emerged significantly under the leadership of politician Sam Rainsy whose announcement on the Vietnamese-Cambodian border is bringing back to mind some tragic pages of complex and ambiguous historical relations between the two over the Mekong Delta (Rainsy, 2013:43-62). His recent campaign is marked by a more aggressive attitude toward Vietnam, using the term "Yuan" to indicate "Vietnamese." (BBC Vietnamese, 2014). To his explanation, whether the term can be interpreted by any means, it brings back the specter of the past into the Vietnamese-Cambodian vulnerable relationship. By taking the political situation that the country had to face under Siamese-Vietnamese intervention in the early 19th century, some Cambodian politicians are misconstruing their vision in regional politics and manipulating historical legacies for politically motivated propaganda.

In the same struggle of narrating the past, Lao contesting precolonial historiography and politics of memory under both nationalist and Marxist ideology are implicit responses to Thai and Vietnamese national narratives. They most notably take into consideration notions of Laos origin and the rebellion of Chao Anou to signify a distinct set of characters and identities (Mayoury and Pheuiphanh, 1988; 1998; Pholsena, 2004). Lao people are trying to present their glorious path of history that they are not a subordinate of Siam or Vietnam. In the particular case of the Chao Anou, the event of 1827, it was not by any means the case of a disloyal vassal leading an unjustified rebellion, but a national hero trying to save his nation from the cultural, and physical annihilation forced by the aggressive Thai policies (Vickery, 1990:441; Goscha et al., 2003).

On the contrary, Thai writing of history is characterized by an egocentric viewpoint toward their neighbors. It was a "peaceful country that was repeatedly threatened by foreign enemies" who were either competing rivals or inferior and depended on it (Winichakul, 2005:123). From that perspective, the Burmese became a Thai age-old enemy whose vicious invasions brought severe destruction to Siam. The hatred was the product of the recompilation of Siamese ponsawadan after the defeat of Ayutthaya in 1767 (Chutintaranond, 1992; Chutintaranond, 1995). Recently the enmity has been reproduced in a new form of histori-

cal knowledge through commercial media: movies and TV dramas such as *The Legend of Suriyothai* (2001) and *King Naresuan* (2007-2015) (Jory, 2003). To the East of Siam, was an image of another enemy, the Vietnamese/Yuan, “the race with many faces and many tricks up their sleeves.” (Puaksom, 2003:42). Accordingly, the Siamese once helped Vietnam to survive, but returned by improper acknowledgement. In addition, because of the Vietnamese claim over Laos and Cambodia, Thais lost their “territories” during the Franco-Siamese wars (which then became part of the French Indochina), and most recently, the threat of Vietnamese communism (Thongchai, 2005:120). A 1938 Thai textbook reminded the Siamese, “We must not forget the times when our country was invaded by enemies. During the Ayutthaya period, we fell to the Burmese two times. In the Bangkok era, we again lost our North-East Lao territory, Cambodia and Battambang monthon (district) to the French.” (Chutintaranond, 1992:97).

For writings of Vietnamese history, two contemporary tendencies reject a regional approach to the trans-Mekong historical theme. The first is the Viet-centric narrative in which Vietnamese history is generally viewed from the perspective of the ethnic majority and taking their viewpoint from a palace chronicle and political center as the dominant category of historical description. The second is the result of the nationalist revolution of the twentieth century that stressed xenophobia of the Vietnamese past. “Against foreign invasion” then is cast as the country’s most prominent identity and tradition which goes on for thousands of years. This creates intolerant feelings toward neighbors and their histories as “inferior” and “opposed” rather than friendly neighbors. Thailand, Cambodia and Laos were depicted as either vassal states or competitors/potential invaders in the region. It has been decades since the end of the Indochina War and the last gunshot rang out on the Vietnamese-Cambodian border. Matters of war and conflict are out of date and it is the time for rewriting nationalist historiography. The new discourse is renavigating Vietnamese history as part of regional evolution, and by doing so, revealing a pattern of “global history” or “transnational history” that is drawing more integration with Vietnam’s neighboring Thai, Campa, Khmer, Lao, and many others.

The discrepancies in historical accounts among countries in the Mekong region erect cultural and political barriers that distance different bodies of knowledge and perception from mutual understanding and integration. Past legacies are creating mistrust and isolation among peoples in the mainland whose specter of the enemy and humiliated defeat still overshadow their vision of neighbors. Southeast Asian history in its new phase is assigned to the need to create a dialogue beyond nationalism and ethnocentrism, signifying millennia of sharing natural and human landscapes. Changing perceptions of the past allows us to engage with different perspectives and open discussion because there would be no better way to bridge the differences than by offering a transnational history that focuses on connecting pasts and human flows in time and space. Given the fact that modern nation-states in Southeast Asia are the product of the 20th-century nationalist movement, a regional historical version of the mainland should particularly concentrate on human interaction politically and culturally. Taking the Mekong for instance, it has been a common natural possession of various groups historically before it was divided by national boundaries. The river, therefore, was a field of human connectivity and exchange long before it became a subject of political contest. Such narrative creates a sense of interconnection under which each group relocates itself into a larger human society and cultural unit where Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam are just elements of a diverse and dynamic linguistic and civilized structure.

There are still many myths on the mainland to be unraveled, especially mythical responses to emerging nationalism. Those images use potential foreign threats and symbols of aggressive foreigners as a source of inspiration for internal unity and for inventing national traditions. In most cases, however, projections of state-making were launched by political centers and capitals where local voices and knowledge have been sidelined and disregarded. Although recent critical scholarship has tended to debunk political essentialism by looking at the role of modern nation-states in self-imaging, very little effort has been paid to relationships among countries in times of competing nation-building. Regional intellectual dialogue has the advantage of going beyond egocentric and imperial knowledge by expanding various categories of “local knowledge.” (Winichakul, 2005:124). The approach encourages more integrated comprehension in addressing sensitive agendas among countries and playing as a connecting vehicle across political boundaries. I have mentioned the Mekong as common property, and many other transcultural heritages, architectural styles, temples, cults and beliefs... were commonly achieved by Tai, Viet, Lao, Khmer, Burmese, and hundreds of others. They should be subjects of celebration and mutual acknowledgment rather than sources of identity dispute and extreme-nationalist claims. The introduction of new bodies of knowledge that are shared by different perspectives and peoples also involves, not ignoring or avoiding sensitive issues, but putting them forward into open consideration and discussion. The gap between perception and different epistemological foundations can be overcome by encouraging scholarly negotiation, exchange dialogue, and the promotion of a regional approach. Take several research programs on the Mekong for instance, the Lower Mekong Archaeological Project (or LOMAP) begun in 1996 and the Greater Angkor Project run by the University of Sydney in cooperation with Southeast Asian institutions and scholars shed new light upon the wide range of interconnections economically, politically and religiously across different natural landscapes and ethnic groups. From the Funan kingdom to the Khmer empire in the classical age to the intermingling and dynamic mobilization of Vietnamese, Thai, Lao, Khmer and others across the Mekong in the early modern times, the river was a field of human dynamism and was not a subject of a claim by anyone before the coming of the western colonial era (Winichakul 1994). People along the Mekong even expanded their network of trade and cultural exchange along valleys and mountains up to the Vietnamese Central Highland and strengthened their political lineage for centuries (Salemink, 2008:51-69; 2011:27-50).

The formation of ASEAN's cultural identity, it may be argued, must be grounded in the shared historical legacies and solidarities of Southeast Asian communities whose interactions extend back thousands of years. From the maritime networks of Austronesian-speaking populations - the so-called Nusantara - that began some 5,000 years ago, to the commercial exchanges among coastal, lowland, and upland groups along what scholars describe as riverine exchange systems, these interconnections have long shaped the political, economic, and commercial landscapes of the region (Bronson, 1979; Solheim, 2007). This was, in effect, a “sea common to all” where cultures and languages were bound together, resources shared, commodities exchanged, and vital ecological spaces interwoven (Lockard, 2010). For the mainland populations, the Annamite Cordillera - often imagined as a formidable geographic barrier - was in reality a dynamic arena of exchange among Khmer, Cham, Lao, Vietnamese, and the diverse upland groups inhabiting what is today Vietnam's Central Highlands. Here, networks of trade in eaglewood, ivory, salt, iron, gold, ceramics, and dried fish were indispensable to the survival and cohesion of these commu-

nities (Hickey, 1982; Tran, 2015; Tran and Nakamura, 2018; Griffiths, Hardy, and Wade, eds, 2019). By the sixteenth century, when the Portuguese reached Malacca, they encountered a city that had become a marketplace between East and West, offering not only goods from India and China but also the diverse products of Southeast Asian societies - from Cochinchina, Ayutthaya, and Java, among others (Pires, 1944). The model of Malacca, however, was not unique. Similar patterns of interconnected urban-commercial nodes could be found across both the mainland and the archipelagos of Southeast Asia, stretching from Chiang Mai, Luang Prabang, Hoi An, Hà Tiên, Angkor, and Ayutthaya to Palembang and the Maluku Spice Islands (Breazeale, ed. 1999; Wheeler, 2001; Tara, and Irving, eds. 2013; Baker and Phongpaichit, 2017; Ang, 2019; Hang, 2024).

As the Thai historian Sunait Chutintaranond has observed in his discussion of the region's intense interconnectivity, "Located on the international business route, Southeast Asia became a melting pot of cultures" (Guo, 2019). This condition fostered a strong sense of belonging, as well as the sharing of resources and cultural practices, which became integral to the collective identity of Southeast Asia (Buathong and Binson, 2020). For this reason, much of the region's heritage reflects deep patterns of cultural resonance and historical interaction. Moreover, the history of Southeast Asia is equally a history of joint struggles against common external threats. In the thirteenth century, the peoples of Champa, Dai Viet, Java, and Burma fought together to resist the Mongol invasions; centuries later, the Vietnamese, Khmer, and Lao peoples joined in resistance against French colonial expansion. In 1865, the Khmer monk Pou Kombo launched a rebellion against both French authority and the Norodom dynasty in Kompong Cham and Kompong Thom (Cambodia), as well as in Châu Doc, Tây Ninh, and the Dong Tháp Muoi region of Vietnam. The uprising drew together Khmer, Stieng, Cham, Mnong, and Vietnamese communities along the frontier corridor in a shared struggle against a common enemy. Pou Kombo allied with the Vietnamese leader Truong Quyen, creating one of the most vigorous episodes of anti-French resistance in the 1860s-Lower Mekong (Maître, 1912:492). Episodes such as these are not isolated but rather characteristic of the millennia-long history of interaction among Southeast Asian societies. They continue to provide inspiration for contemporary forms of regional solidarity, particularly when such legacies are embraced as part of a shared cultural and historical identity.

Networks of ASEAN's Young Scholarship

The focus on Southeast Asian Studies in the region deserves more investment from the young generation of scholars in producing a dynamic intellectual network. They embody new production of knowledge and will be taking responsibility for regional connectivity and cooperation in the coming decades. Their advantages are that young scholars in the field are open to abundant viewpoints from local, regional to global perspectives. They also have no direct engagement with warfare and ideological hostility. Despite that fact, however, it does not necessarily mean they cannot sometimes become victims of nationalist propaganda through nationalist historical teaching. Other problems may come from their lack of interest in studying neighbors while a lot of attention has been directed to outside fancy attractions such as Japan, Korea, Europe and America. The lack of interest in contemporary regional updates in the case of Vietnam for instance is spreading among people and policy-makers alike. On January 7th, 2013, Cambodia presented the homegrown electric car, Angkor EV 2013 which surprised and embarrassed many Vietnamese. Despite

of request made by the Vietnamese government, the Lao hydropower project of Xayaburi is going ahead with construction. When Cambodia refused to bring the South China Sea/East Sea to the agenda of the ASEAN Summit 2012, the Vietnamese were shocked, taking into account the friendship and neighborhood between the two. And most recently, Vietnamese shops in Phnom Penh became targets of a neo-nationalist movement led by the Cambodian opposition party. Dramatic change occurring regionally challenges the conventional mindset of the Vietnamese. A traditional “ally” during the Cold War and “National Liberation” has been disrupted significantly and a new geopolitical structure of the Mekong region is being formed which for many Vietnamese means they are left behind because of their out-of-date and downward-looking perspective toward their neighbors. Their view of Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar is acquired through some preconceptions, biased media and stereotypes rather than first-hand information on the ground.

In my view, the strengthening of networks of ASEAN’s young scholarship not only promotes opportunity for people-to-people relationships and connectivity but more importantly, their intellectual mindset and influence disseminate, changing often negative perceptions of neighbors. Images of past enemies, therefore, are able to be converted into potential partners and friends for the present and future. The young intellectual network in the region has a greater change than ever to strengthen connectivity and shift the conventional focus from “outsider” to “insider” because of emerging opportunities to cooperate and pursue education, business and travel in the region. The prospect not only involves transforming the region from “battlefield to market” but also all sorts of exchange and connection under the facilitation of ASEAN’s regionalized project. To do so, legal frameworks and political will are not sufficient, but a strong cultural foundation that supports people’s awareness of regional unity, diversity and interdependence.

The new scholarly network in the region needs a concrete vision for dialogue of sharing history and culture. There are gatherings and networks for the young scholarship that are providing support or bringing together junior researchers in training. Since 2005, the Asian Research Institute (ARI) at the National University of Singapore (NUS) has provided the annual “Asian Graduate Student Fellowship,” a three-month training program for mostly Southeast Asian graduate students to conduct their research, consult with experts and utilize academic facilities. The fellowship makes a significant contribution to the intellectual development of many young scholars who have a chance to widen their academic connections and greatly benefit from a dynamic exchange at ARI and NUS for their further achievement. Southeast Asian Studies Regional Exchange Program (SEASREP) and the Empowering Network of International Thai Studies (ENIT, Thai Studies Institute, Chulalongkorn University) provide annual financial support for graduate students to conduct research on transnational Southeast Asian studies subjects, or focus on Thailand as in case of the later. Other institutions such as the Southeast Asian Studies Program (Chulalongkorn University) and Center for Khmer Studies (CKS, Cambodia) also offer with it an academic program and internships for students and researchers across the region. It is tremendously valuable for young scholars to engage with those regional dialogues for discussion and exchange because of generates the possibility that they can work together, sharing ideas and building up integrated perspectives. It also helps young Southeast Asianists to keep updated with recent developments that happen with their neighbors as well as redirecting their focus more on regional tendencies and phenomena.

Scholarly communication in Southeast Asian studies is increasingly significant to weave a mosaic of linguistic diversity (Chou et al., 2006:18). Although English is recognized as *lingua franca* for intellectual exchange in the region, the need for linguistic training for young researchers to master another local language is essential and irresistible for any attempt to connect Southeast Asia. The recent withdrawal of foundations such as the Ford Foundation and Rockefeller Foundation resulted in enormous challenges for those who benefited from training programs that promoted linguistic and intellectual interaction. To some extent, it reveals some of the weaknesses of Southeast Asian Studies run by the “locals,” and lack of financial support and facilities, especially in the case of less developed countries. Organizations at higher levels of authority such as ASEAN and SEAMEO may need to put more effort into organizing not only official meetings but also scholarly gatherings and intellectual dialogues in the region. ASEAN’s projection of connectivity and emerging local area studies pose strong challenges to interconnection and mutual dependence. While ASEAN provides an institution and political landscape for the emerging regional intellectual field, the new approach of area studies disseminates local knowledge in a more integrated and region-wide perspective. The transnational knowledge production would lay cultural establishment for new regional perception and consciousness of the past through interacted historical narrative.

At present, however, there remains a pressing need for stronger commitment and sustained reinforcement in initiating and maintaining dialogue among Southeast Asianists within the region - particularly on the mainland - in order to bring scholars together, connect ideas, and mobilize intellectual engagement. One of the central challenges lies in financial resources, which constitute a crucial condition for scholarly exchange and collaboration across Southeast Asia. Traditional sources of external funding have declined significantly over the past decade, a consequence of the global economic slowdown and shifting geopolitical priorities in the post-Cold War era. Although the United States has pledged a “pivot” back to the Asia-Pacific, support for Southeast Asian studies has been considerably reduced. In 2009, for example, the Ford Foundation withdrew from Vietnam and closed its Hanoi office. Likewise, the Rockefeller Foundation-sponsored program Weaving the Mekong into Southeast Asia (WMESEA) Fellowship Program, which funded master’s degrees in Southeast Asian Studies at Chulalongkorn University, was discontinued. Several long-standing programs supported by the European Union have also been terminated, creating substantial obstacles for early-career researchers in the region. In this context, strengthening cooperation, enhancing academic exchange networks, and securing funding sources from within Southeast Asia itself have become increasingly important. The establishment of regional and local funding mechanisms for Southeast Asian studies must become a priority for both public and private sectors. The creation of the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community in 2015 underscores the need for new cooperative mechanisms capable of translating this vision into practice. Yet in reality, this imperative has not received adequate attention from governments in the region. In addition, regional university systems can play a pivotal role by supporting exchange programs and internships, a model that has been implemented successfully in the European Union. At present, many Southeast Asian universities already maintain student and scholar exchange schemes and have signed memoranda of understanding for institutional collaboration, but the results achieved thus far have not matched expectations. The successful realization of such academic connectivity would demonstrate ASEAN not as an abstract political slogan but as a tangible project that inspires and enriches the daily lives of its people.

Conclusion

The study of Southeast Asian history is facing new challenges and opportunities in ASEAN and global contexts. A new paradigm of “Southeast Asian Studies” conducted by local Southeast Asianists is entering a critical moment in producing more integrated comprehension for the assistance of regionalism. Globalization and emerging global studies on the other hand confront conventional area studies following the Euro-American model and shifting the field of knowledge into a more diverse and dynamic landscape. Decentering knowledge production of Southeast Asian Studies allows the region becomes the new center of the field. Widespread established institutions in regional countries pave the way for integrating scholarship and enriching transnational dialogue that significantly contributes to the promotion of ASEAN projection.

For the ASEAN community and connectivity, teaching history can play a significant role in producing implementation that helps Southeast Asians overcome competing historical legacies across political and cultural boundaries. The regional consciousness is indispensable for regionalization because of its functional activeness in bridging peoples whose vision is of integrating the future and sharing the benefit and interdependence of undergoing ASEAN incorporation. In this context, academic institutionalization expects to be part of the projection by appreciating a new generation of Southeast Asianists who are responsible for both the future of teaching Southeast Asian history and the making of ASEAN's integration.

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