**“ASEAN and Southeast Asian Studies: Knowledge Gaps and Challenge for Universities”**

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This special lecture focuses on the distinctions between ASEAN Studies and Southeast Asian Studies (SEA Studies); examines the advantages and disadvantages of each discipline, the challenges they face, and some examples on how both ASEAN and SEA studies are evolving and can be improved.

The difference between ASEAN Studies and SEA Studies:

SEA Studies is commonly defined as “Area Studies”. The origin of this definition can be traced back to Europe and the United States. During the colonial period, civil servants were sent to Southeast Asia to learn the local language and culture. They became the specialists of the region with focus on philology, religion, ancient kingdoms, and literature.

The nature of how the region was studied changed as the political situation changed:

SEA Studies acquired a more political orientation during the Cold War. This was mainly due to the heavy involvement of the United States in Vietnam. The focus of interest in the region shifted. The purpose of study was to aid the ‘Democratic Forces’ against the ‘Forces of Communism’. Anthropology became more involved in SEA Studies during the period. The U.S. State Department employed anthropologist during the Vietnam War.

The differing perspectives of ASEAN Studies and SEA Studies:

The respective perspectives ASEAN Studies and SEA Studies has of the region distinguishes them from one another.

**ASEAN Studies** views the region in terms of nation-states.

**SEA Studies** analyses what is going on in communities, indigenous societies, and domestic economies.

Many current SEA Studies reject early depictions of Southeast Asia. The region was once seen as either Hinduized or Sinicized. This implied that Southeast Asia had no culture or identity of its own, that it merely adopted cultures from the largest civilizations at the time. This theory was supported by the spread of religion which was indeed propagated by the then more civilized cultures.

Modern view of Agency:

Today SEA Studies looks at the region from the point of view of “Agency”. This is a very important term. Agency in history refers to the capacity of society or people to make their own history. This meant that their history was not made or constructed by outsiders.

Agency is also related to identity or in the case of Southeast Asia: **identities** (plural) as the region as a whole is extremely diverse, and it is this diversity that characterizes the region.

Are ASEAN Studies and SEA Studies the same?

Although ASEAN began as a political entity, centering on the idea of nation-states, the ASEAN today is no longer the ASEAN of old. Researching ASEAN today will lead to articles on ASEAN culture, identity, and heritage. These appear to be more related to tradition focuses of SEA Studies. Nevertheless, this could also just be a problem of a lack of conceptual clarity when define ASEAN or SEA as a discipline.

SEA Studies is said to focus often on history, politics, and linguistics. This is the opposite of the global focus that ASEAN Studies claims to study. Therefore, proponents of ASEAN Studies favor it over SEA Studies because of its broader scope. However, advocates of SEA Studies find ASEAN Studies to be very narrow because it focuses on association. For example, East Timor is considered to be in Southeast Asia but not a part of ASEAN. Even when ASEAN was first founded it did not include countries like Burma (Myanmar), Cambodia, and Vietnam. It is this view of how one is associated with ASEAN that limits the study of ASEAN.

SEA Studies does not look at the region in terms of member-states. It views Southeast Asia as a region of peoples, societies, cultures, and economies both formal and informal. SEA Studies wants the study of the region to go beyond government constructions of the region.

“You can ask a country to leave the ASEAN but you can’t ask the country to leave Southeast Asia.”

From the SEA Studies’ point of view ASEAN is a subset of larger region of Southeast Asia. The ASEAN Studies’ point of view is the reverse—that Southeast Asia is part of the more universally-encompassing ASEAN.

Closer examination of current curriculum:

Five Open Universities recently developed the “ASEAN Studies Program”. [Hanoi Open University (*Viet Nam*); Open University of Malaysia (*Malaysia*); Sukhothai Thammatirat Open University (*Thailand*); Universitas Terbuka (*Indonesia*); and UP Open University (*Philippines*)]

The challenge for these courses is to clearly define what ASEAN Studies really is, because the aforementioned lack of clarity is evident when we closely examine what courses these Programs offer.

As it stands, the current course descriptions are inconsistent. For some courses the term ‘ASEAN’ and ‘Southeast Asia’ appear to be interchangeable, whereas some courses clearly separate the two terms.

For example “Introduction to ASEAN”: it is not clear whether it refers to the region or the organization. The same is for “Advanced ASEAN Studies”. On the other hand, the course “The ASEAN Organization” makes it very clear what it is about. There are comparative studies courses that refer to ASEAN, but the nature of study could easily also mean the study of Southeast Asia. “ASEAN in Transition” and “Positioning and Contribution of ASEAN in Regional and Global Contexts” are unclear whether they refer to the organization or the region. Other examples include courses in art, music, culture in the ASEAN region or courses that deal with ASEAN economics, politics, government, and development.

Another major issue is that, for an online course there is insufficient information on the courses offered to be found online. Only the course title is available on the website making the description of these courses very vague. It seems that conceptually, there is a lack of clarity to what they are referring to.

Facing the challenges of ASEAN and SEA studies:

One of the biggest weaknesses is the methodology. Most methodology hinges on a particular discipline, however SEA Studies is a multidisciplinary study, so the methodology used varies and can be inconsistent between different studies of the same issue.

ASEAN Studies is trying to develop an ASEANology method, but what does that mean exactly?

There are many sub-regions within the region. These sub-regions were created by ASEAN based on massive infrastructure plans. These sub-region definitions were created to accommodate cross-country infrastructures. The amount of sub-regions has led to a growing field of ‘Border Studies’: the multidisciplinary study of borders between two or more countries.

However, many communities do not adhere or care about these borders. The reason is because they used to be part of the same community before borders were drawn and do not personally connect with the authorities that decided the borders—or even what countries they are in—but more with what group of people they are.

A very state-orientated point of view has limitations when studying these communities. SEA Studies attempts to look at actual communities and how they relate with one another.

Defining Southeast Asia:

The definitions of Southeast Asia can be either thematic or comparative.

**Thematic studies** do not focus on any particular country, but studies a common theme that is present in different countries. Hence, some thematic studies are also considered to be comparative studies.

**Comparative studies** are difficult in regional studies. It is easier to compare two or three countries than an entire region. This is because in order to make comparisons, one has to make assumptions of comparability. The more variables present, as is often the case with a region as large and diverse as Southeast Asia, the more difficult it is to validate the findings.

Southeast Asianist, specialist in own country + 1:

It is common practice for students to study about their own countries, even when studying abroad, and they continue to focus only on their own country after graduation.

Another challenge is to try to encourage students to study ‘the other’ and become specialists in other countries in the region apart from their own.

Southeast Asian Studies Regional Exchange Program (SEASREP) is trying to define a conceptual framework for SEA Studies. The ideal is for Southeast Asian scholars, or Southeast Asianists, to have an understanding of their own country plus at least one other country from the region.