



Southeast Asian Studies in China

EDITED BY

Saw Swee-Hock and John Wong

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Preface

Under the ASEAN-China Study Programme launched in 2003, the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) organized the ASEAN-China Forum: Realities and Prospects on 23–24 June 2004. From this forum, a book entitled *ASEAN-China Relations: Realities and Prospects* edited by Saw Swee-Hock, Sheng Lijun and Chin Kin Wah was published by ISEAS in the following year to provide a more permanent source of valuable information for a wider audience.

Under the same Programme, the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and the East Asian Institute (EAI) of the National University of Singapore organized the Conference on Southeast Asian Studies in China: Challenges and Prospects on 12–14 January 2006. The three-day conference was divided into two parts: the first was devoted to papers written and presented in English and the second to papers written in Chinese and presented in Mandarin. This was meant to facilitate the gathering of a larger group of Chinese scholars, including those conversant in Chinese but not English. The chapters incorporated in this book consist of those papers written in English and subsequently revised for publication in this book.

In recognition of the dominant political and economic presence of China in Southeast Asia, the conference was designed to promote a better understanding among the peoples of the two regions. Beyond superficial contacts through official visits, business and tours, people from both sides still have large gaps of knowledge about each other. Scholars and academics from both sides have an important role to play in terms of creating greater awareness of each other through research, workshops, and conferences. Whilst many universities and research institutes in the ASEAN region are conducting studies on various aspects of China, it is equally important to promote a better understanding of Southeast Asia among the people and the Government

of China. The book traces the development of Southeast Asian Studies in China, discusses the current status of these studies, examines the problems encountered in the pursuit of these studies, and attempts to evaluate their prospects in the years ahead.

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A Review of Southeast Asian Studies in China

Saw Swee-Hock

INTRODUCTION

With fast developing relations between China and ASEAN there is a growing need for both regions to better understand each other as their political and economic interests become increasingly interwoven. Of course, the rise of China has long attracted much academic interest in the country from all over the world, including Southeast Asia. However, the state of Southeast Asian Studies in China is a less well-explored terrain. Yet this is an important issue as growing Chinese engagement of Southeast Asia needs to be underpinned by sound academic research about the region. In order to better understand the changes and challenges facing Southeast Asian Studies in China, the East Asian Institute and the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in Singapore jointly organized a Conference on Southeast Asian Studies in China: Challenges and Prospects, on 12–14 January 2006. The following is a brief overview of the key issues brought up during the conference.

HISTORY OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES IN CHINA

The study of Southeast Asia has deep roots in China. Dating back to as early as the third century, the records of Southeast Asia composed of the

memoirs and notes of China's envoys and their assistants, monks making pilgrimages to South and Southeast Asia as well as navigators and travellers. In particular, the famed Chinese explorer, eunuch Zheng He, greatly enhanced Chinese knowledge of the region through his seven voyages. Under the Qing dynasty, the waves of Chinese immigrants to Southeast Asia in search of livelihood also boosted China's understanding of, and ties with the region at the popular level.

Even though there exists rich ancient literature on Southeast Asia, modern academic research could be traced back to the early twentieth century when Jinan University was founded in 1906 and courses on overseas Chinese and Southeast Asian history were first taught. Since then, China's Southeast Asian Studies have undergone several phases of development which have been largely shaped by two factors — China's relations with Southeast Asia and the domestic political and academic environment in China.

China's relations with Southeast Asia would provide an external impetus for the development of the field, and condition public and scholarly attention to it. China's domestic environment, on the other hand, would directly impact upon the academic freedom, resources and even approaches for scholars in the field. Understandably, a restricted environment, few sanctioned research methods and theories, and scarce resources would impede the development of research on the region.

It was in the period from the 1950s to mid-1960s that China's Southeast Asian Studies were established as a field in the country, due in part to cordial ties between China and Southeast Asia. As China was also following Soviet-style development, there was also leeway for academic research, albeit restricted to the Soviet academic paradigm and Marxist orthodoxy. This period saw several important developments, including the setting up of four regional research centres as well as a few national policy-related research units. The former included two institutes in Guangzhou and one each in Xiamen and Kunming. They later become leading regional centres on Southeast Asian Studies in China. The policy-related research units were associated with the Beijing central government and the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences. Meanwhile, university courses were also taught on the history, anti-colonial movements and languages of Southeast Asia. And academic research focused on overseas Chinese, Southeast Asian history, and the politics and external relations of the region.

These fledgling research activities were, however, paralysed by the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976 when China was awash with chaos and intellectual activities were viewed with suspicion. The country's relations with Southeast Asia also dropped to a low point because of Cold War tensions

between China and most Southeast Asian countries, China's export of communist revolution to the region, and Indonesia's suppression of the China-backed Communist Party as well as persecution of local ethnic Chinese.

It was only during the reform era under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping that Southeast Asian Studies started to be revived in China in the late 1970s to 1980s. Chinese politics also lost its radical tinge and more leeway opened up for academic research. Improved Chinese ties with the region generated a demand in China for better understanding of Southeast Asia and the relevant political and language experts as well. Southeast Asian languages were taught at several universities including Beida, Beijing and Guangzhou Foreign Language Colleges, and Guangxi Nationality College.

Not only were the previous regional centres revived, new ones also emerged. By the end of the 1980s, the research institutes on Southeast Asia grew from four prior to the Cultural Revolution, to twelve. The scholarly centres included Xiamen, Jinan, Zhongshan, Beijing, and Zhengzhou Universities as well as the Chinese, Yunnan, Guangxi and Shanghai Academies of Social Sciences. Governmental research units included those at the China Institute for Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) under the Ministry of State Security, the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS) under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Shanghai Institute for International Studies (SIIS), and the Institute for International Trade Studies under the Ministry of External Trade (and later Ministry of External Trade and Economic Work). All these activities paved the way for a recovery of the Southeast Asian Studies field in China.

The field received a further boost in the 1990s and 2000s as China's relations with Southeast Asia improved and gained significance, especially with closer political exchanges and economic relations. Meanwhile, research methods in the field were also updated and more disciplines were introduced as China's social scientists became more exposed and receptive to Western academic methods and theories. A growing number of discipline-based scholars were also devoting attention to Southeast Asia, thus leading to the diversification and professionalization of the field.

As policy-makers frequently seek advice from scholars, Southeast Asian specialists have greater opportunities for policy-related research and consultancy. This can be seen in, for example, the production of reports specifically for the central and local governments, the direct involvement of scholars in policy-related issues and the role of academic publications in influencing policy thinking. A specific example of such influence on policy was the participation of Chinese scholars in the ASEAN-China FTA study group where their recommendations were generally accepted by the leaders.

Given the vastness of China, it is important to note the role of local studies on policy-making, particularly in terms of local policy orientation toward Southeast Asia, and the policy recommendations made by provinces to the central government on this issue. For instance, Southeast Asian Studies in Yunnan and later in Guangxi have had a significant impact on China's relations with Southeast Asia, especially to neighbouring countries. Given the deepening and growing complexity of ASEAN-China relations, detailed technical researches at the local level will be increasingly important in terms of providing micro-level policy recommendation to help develop the relationship.

CURRENT STATUS

As of now, the major research centres on Southeast Asian Studies in China are primarily located in Beijing, Xiamen, Guangzhou, Shanghai, Nanning and Kunming. They have division of labour along the geographic dimension as well as the high-low politics dimension. First, central research centres, such as the CICIR, CIIS, SIIS, CASS and Beijing University, tend to focus on region-wide issues. In contrast, regional research centres tend to focus on sub-regional affairs and individual countries. Second, research centres in Beijing and Shanghai tend to study high political issues, namely, international relations, security, politics, military, regionalism and macro economy. Regional research centres in Fujian, Guangdong, Guangxi and Yunnan tend to focus on low political issues, including the economy, history, overseas Chinese, culture, ethnicities, religion, and other social issues.

Over the years, the focus of Southeast Asian research in China has also changed. A study of the two leading journals in Southeast Asian Studies in China from 1992 to 2004 by John Wong and Lai Hongyi provided us with a glimpse of that. It was found that the share of its articles on ASEAN and Southeast Asia, greater China's ties with Southeast Asia, overseas Chinese, and Southeast Asian Studies had increased noticeably. On the other hand, those on individual Southeast Asian countries declined significantly. While this is so, some countries are covered more frequently than others, with Indonesia covered the most. This is followed by a second group which includes Vietnam, Singapore and Malaysia, and then a third group comprising the Philippines and Thailand.

In terms of disciplines, China's Southeast Asian research was mainly focused on the economy in the 1990s when economic performance was impressive and Southeast Asia's mode of development seemed to offer lessons for China. In the 2000s, however, politics overtook economy as the primary

focus. Greater attention was also paid to history and society that included overseas Chinese. All in all, the changes in research focus suggest that in recent times, China's scholars are more interested in the domestic and external politics, society and culture of Southeast Asian countries and the region.

PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

Despite the progress made in China's Southeast Asian Studies in recent years, the field still faces many challenges that are hampering its development. Overall, the current scale of Southeast Asian teaching programmes and curriculum development is not consonant with the present state of China-Southeast Asian relations. With the signing of the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement, economic ties are likely to become closer, thus increasing the need for more experts in Southeast Asian affairs and languages in China. An observation raised during the conference was that while large China companies have expressed interest in doing business in Southeast Asia, many do not have much information about the social, cultural, political and economic systems in the identified countries.

China therefore needs to make greater efforts to promote Southeast Asian teaching programmes and academic research to meet such demand. As a field, Southeast Asian Studies in China needs to enhance its resources, funding, pool of talents, language skills and academic rigour. However, the field now faces serious challenges in each of these capabilities.

First, with regard to information resources, timely, accurate and systemic information is critical for sound academic research, particularly for area studies. However, China is still lagging behind its counterparts in this respect. The Southeast Asian collections in Chinese libraries remain scanty. For example, even the largest collection on Southeast Asia in China, that is, the Centre for Southeast Asian Studies at Xiamen University (CSASXU), appears small compared to the library at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore. The former has only 52,000 items (including books and theses), about a tenth of the ISEAS collection.

Second, the lack of funding for Southeast Asian research in China exacerbates this resource problem. It also prevents the relevant institutes from funding more overseas trips and holding more academic exchanges with scholars in the region, thus limiting their local knowledge of the region.

Third, the lack of talent continues to hobble Southeast Asian research in China. Students of international relations still tend to gravitate toward the great powers such as the United States, Europe and Japan in their research focus. This is especially so since the prestige, opportunities for academic

advancement, and overseas travel and research are still more abundant for researchers delving into these regions. Not surprisingly then, fewer talents are attracted to Southeast Asian Studies. Indeed, up to now, many first-class Chinese universities such as Tsinghua, Fudan, Nanjing and Wuhan have still not set up Southeast Asian teaching programmes or offered regional courses.

Fourth, poor language abilities among researchers pose another problem for the progress of Southeast Asian Studies in China. Only a small number of researchers are conversant in Southeast Asian native languages. The most frequently cited foreign language is English. Hence most researchers on Southeast Asia in China are better equipped to study ASEAN, Singapore and the Philippines where the working language is English. Their knowledge about other countries in the region continues to be hindered by their failure to master local languages, which impedes their ability to use local materials.

All the above problems contribute to the lack of academic rigour in Southeast Asian research in China. As it is, the field still needs to increase its theoretical depth and empirical width. The situation has not improved much from the past when a study of articles published by four Southeast Asian journals in China from 1987 to 1991 found that most of them displayed academic efforts at lower levels. This included analyses of context, nature, process and implications of an issue or event as well as provisioning of information on an event or issue. While a few journal articles in recent times have attempted academic work at a higher level such as theoretical debates, empirical research and case studies, they still form a conspicuous minority.

Such poor rigour has been worsened by lax academic standards in research and publications. Compared with academic publications in the West, those in China in area studies in general follow a more lenient review process. There are usually no formal requirements for literature reviews, footnoting of sources, giving credit to cited arguments, rigorous development and demonstration of arguments and application of sound research methods and theories in the field. These tend to undermine the quality of research output.

Despite these problems, one should be cautiously optimistic about the future of Southeast Asian Studies in China. To be sure, a growing number of young Chinese are becoming more interested in Southeast Asia, thanks to fast-developing bilateral relations between China and ASEAN. More young Chinese have also been exposed and attracted to Southeast Asian cultures through travel or further studies. For instance, a growing number of young Chinese have been flocking to countries like Thailand to teach Chinese due to a lack of qualified local teachers. This may help stimulate more interest in Southeast Asian Studies. The evolving geo-political context may also help raise the profile of Southeast Asian Studies in China. Given China's rise and

its professed foreign policy goal of becoming a responsible regional and world power, the government has paid more attention to academic research on neighbouring countries, especially Southeast Asia.

To enhance the status and quality of Southeast Asian Studies in China, some proposals were put forward. One is for the Chinese Education Ministry, as the most important player in controlling education, to place more importance on Southeast Asian teaching programmes and to promote its development. Much more financial support should also be provided to faculty so that they have more opportunities to do field research and attend international conferences abroad. There is also room for collaboration in terms of educational exchanges and cooperation between China and ASEAN. A relevant suggestion is for Southeast Asian governments to set up study centres promoting the region throughout China, following the examples of Australia and Japan.