

Southeast Asian Studies: Insiders and Outsiders, or is Culture and Identity a Way Forward?

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Abstrak

Debates continue to multiply on the definition and rationale of Southeast Asia as a region and on the utility of the multidisciplinary field of area studies. However, we have now entered a post-colonialist, post-Orientalist, post-structuralist stage of reflection and re-orientation in the era of globalization, and a strong tendency on the part of insiders to pose these issues in terms of an insider-outsider dichotomy. On the one hand, the study of Southeast Asia for researchers from outside the region has become fragmented. This is for very obvious reasons: the strengthening and re-energizing of academic disciplines, the increasing popularity of other non-regional multidisciplinary studies, and the entry of globalization studies into our field of vision. On the other hand, how has the local Southeast Asian academy addressed these major issues of change in conceptualizing the region from an insider perspective? In filling in and giving substance to an outsider, primarily Euro-American- Australian-centric definition and vision of Southeast Asia, some local academics have recently been inclined to construct Southeast Asia in terms of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN): a nation-state-based, institutional definition of what a region comprises. Others continue to operate at a localized level exploring small-scale communities and territories, while a modest number focus on sub-regional issues (the Malay-Indonesian world or the Mekong sub-region are examples). However, further reflections suggest that the Euro-American-Australian hegemony is a thing of the past and the ground has shifted to a much greater emphasis on academic activity within the region. Southeast Asia-based academics are also finding it much more important to network within the region and to capture, understand, and analyze what Chinese, Japanese, and Korean scholars are saying about Southeast Asia, its present circumstances and trajectories, and their increasingly close involvement with the region within a greater Asia-Pacific rim. The paper argues that the insider-outsider dichotomy requires considerable qualification. It is a neat way of dramatizing the aftermath of colonialism and Orientalism and of reasserting local priorities, agendas, and interests. But there might be a way forward in resolving at least some of these apparently opposed positions with recourse to the concepts of culture and identity in order to address Southeast Asian diversities, movements, encounters, hybridization, and hierarchies.