



## Southeast Asians as Southeast Asianists Promoting and Nurturing Home-grown Scholarship



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### [ *Abstract* ]

The present paper intends to explain the probable reasons and practical circumstances for the paucity of local scholars in the region in attaining international recognition as Southeast Asianists. Far from being an apologetic piece, on the contrary, our goal is to first ascertain the causal factors for the lacuna, and in turn, to propose hopeful and realistic panaceas in resolving and overcoming the dire situation. Why? The rationale and advantageous factors in nurturing Southeast Asians as Southeast Asianist follow in the later part of the paper.

**Keywords:** Southeast Asianists, home-grown scholarship, Southeast Asian Studies, English education, Western-trained

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## **I . Introduction**

Since the beginning of the formal study of the region that came to be termed Southeast Asia namely from the end of the Pacific War (1941-1945), scholars from beyond the region have dominated the field. Besides the notable pioneers and astute thinkers who had brought forth path-breaking works to the field, many other foreign scholars who had followed their footsteps have been pushing further the boundaries of knowledge in Southeast Asian studies (SEAS) (see Ooi and King [in press]). There is no doubt of the enormous contributions non-native scholars have brought to SEAS. Owing to the sluggish development of education across the region during the colonial period and only became increasingly progressive in the post-war decades, understandably few Southeast Asianists numbered among native Southeast Asians. Gradually in the 1950s and 1960s, increasing numbers of Southeast Asians were sent abroad for tertiary education to Britain, Europe, North America, Australia, and New Zealand thereby ushering in the emergence of local-born scholars albeit Western-trained who studied the region across academic disciplines such as history, sociology, anthropology, archaeology, politics, economics. (In the pre-war period of colonial rule, a handful of native Southeast Asians did seek further studies in professional disciplines, notably medicine, law, and engineering in the metropolitan centers of colonial powers.) Nonetheless, even in this second decade of the 21st century, undeniably, the fact remains that there is a lacuna of Southeast Asians who are specialists in the region.

The present paper intends to explain the probable reasons and practical circumstances for the paucity of local scholars in the region in attaining international recognition as Southeast Asianists. Far from being an apologetic piece, on the contrary, our goal is to first ascertain the causal factors for the lacuna, and in turn, to propose hopeful and realistic panaceas in resolving and overcoming the dire situation. Why? The rationale and advantageous factors in nurturing Southeast Asians as Southeast Asianist follow in the later part of the paper.

## II . Designation of the Region Called Southeast Asia

The term “Southeast Asia” as we understand it today came into usage in the immediate decades following the end of the Pacific War (see Fifield 1983: 1-2; Bentley 1986: 275; King 2004 III: 1232; Wolters 1982). It was coined during wartime when the Allied powers, namely the Anglo-American military alliance, were planning and strategizing to re-occupy the hitherto colonial territories of Western powers which had been invaded and occupied by Imperial Japan since mid-1942.

While Thailand was able to avoid colonization by Western imperialist powers, other territories of what are the contemporary members of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), all came under the yoke of colonial rule, some for even several centuries. Hence, modern-day Myanmar was known as British Burma; Malaysia, West/Peninsular Malaysia as British Malaya while East Malaysia, British Borneo (Sarawak, North Borneo, Brunei); Brunei as a component of British Borneo; Indonesia, as the Dutch/Netherlands East Indies; the Philippines, initially under Spain (16th-19th century), then U.S. (1898-1946); Annam, Tonkin, Cochinchina (components of modern Vietnam) and the Kingdom of Cambodia since 1887 was collectively known as French Indochina, and in 1893, the Kingdom of Laos was included. Although not an ASEAN member, Timor Leste was Portuguese Timor (1702-1975), thereafter under Indonesia as Timor Timur (1976-1999). Thailand alone retained its sovereignty and independence. A year before the stealth attack on Pearl Harbor, Bangkok, and Tokyo signed a treaty of cooperation, and Thailand again was spared the indignity of foreign occupation.

In plans for the reoccupation of the aforesaid colonial territories, London and Washington designated two theaters of military operation, viz. South-East Asia Command (SEAC) and the South West Pacific Area Command (SWPA) respectively. Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten became Supreme Allied Commander of SEAC (1943-1946) overseeing a military operation theater comprising, initially of India, Burma, Ceylon, Malaya, Sumatra and, from August 1945, the Dutch East Indies and the southern part of

Indochina. For political commitments, the Philippines was incorporated into SWPA under U.S. Army General Douglas MacArthur as Supreme Commander (1942-1945). Besides the Philippines, SWPA's areas of operation encompassed Borneo, the Dutch East Indies (excluding Sumatra), East Timor, Australia, Papua and New Guinea, and the western part of the Solomon Islands.

Hence, the present-day term "Southeast Asia" was appropriated from Mountbatten's SEAC including Thailand, the Philippines, and Timor Leste. Interestingly, before SEAC, German-speaking scholars and the Japanese intellectuals came close to realizing the concept of "Southeast Asia," namely *Südostasien* (lit. "South East Asia") and *Tōnan Ajia* (lit. "Southeast Asia") respectively (see Ooi 2009; Hajime 2005; Reid 1999). While Japanese scholars in the post-First World War (1914-1918) period referenced their term "as a collective whole of the territories south and east of China that represented both economic and, strategic and military significance," earlier, their German counterparts "were utilizing the term *Südostasien* in reference to Southeast Asia where they discerned broad cultural similarities" (Ooi 2009: 442). The Chinese term, *Nanyang*, simply "South Seas," the area southwards of the Chinese mainland, predated both the German and Japanese terms, being in usage since the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), or even earlier.

The formation of ASEAN in 1967, and its subsequent inclusive membership expanding to Brunei (1984), Vietnam (1993), Myanmar and Laos (1997), and Cambodia (1997), realized and further concretized Southeast Asia as a region, not unlike the EU (European Union) is to Europe.

### III. Beginnings of SEAS

The genesis of SEAS as a formal program could be traced to the 1940s at Yale University in New Haven. The wartime needs for knowledge and acquisition of languages and familiarity with geographical areas for military operations for military personnel drew on Yale's existing "facilities" then to meet this pressing necessity. Thanks to two scholars who had laid the foundation at

Yale that was able to accommodate the U.S. Army's language and area studies training. Clive Day (1871-1951), the pioneering American historian of Indonesia, who joined the faculty in the late 1890s, gradually throughout his tenure (retired in 1936) amassed a collection of source materials on Southeast Asia for the university library. Day's efforts were continued by Raymond Kennedy (1906-1950), sociologist and anthropologist of Indonesia and the Philippines, who, between 1932 and 1949, established "new scholarship and teaching on the region," to earn the title of "founding father" of Southeast Asia Studies at Yale (Council on Southeast Asia Studies at Yale University n.d.). Then, in his late twenties, Kennedy was a "one-man center"; by the mid-1930s, Day was heading for retirement.

Wartime necessity saw the convening of a formal program on Southeast Asia.

A program in Southeast Asia Studies was initiated at Yale during World War II, in response to a call for language and area studies for military personnel. Professors William S. Cornyn (1906–71) and Isidore Dyen (1913-2008), linguistic scholars in Burmese and Malayo-Polynesian respectively, developed a set of language courses for the Army Specialized Training Program (Council on Southeast Asia Studies at Yale University n.d.).

Once the Pacific War ended, the military necessity too ended. But it was through the tireless efforts and "driving force" of Kennedy, coupled with the onset of the Cold War (1947-1990) whereby Southeast Asia became increasingly pivotal geopolitically and strategically, that the language and area studies program of the region continued at Yale. Developments subsequently led to what we have presently whereby the Council on Southeast Asia Studies offers an interdisciplinary program within the Whitney and Betty Macmillan Center for International and Area Studies.

Within Southeast Asia itself, the beginning of SEAS was a postwar development (Ooi 2009: 427). SEAS manifested in two categories: SEAS as a module, course, or program taught in tertiary institutions, and SEAS as a research agenda based in centers, institutions, and/or departments within universities or as

stand-alone research entities. For the first category, the Institute of Asian Studies (later the Asian Center in 1968) at the University of the Philippines (UP) in 1955 pioneered the offering of courses to both undergraduates and postgraduates. SEAS which focus on the Philippines was a component within the overall Asian studies program. The Ford Foundation-supported Institute of SEAS (ISEAS), Singapore established in 1968 represented the first purpose-built center in the region. Lending support in the form of dissemination is the scholarly journals with a special focus on the region as a whole or specifically one or several of the nation-states. *Philippine Studies* (1953) by Ateneo de Manila University even predated UP's institute. The inaugural issue of the *Journal of Southeast Asian History* in 1960 by the Department of History, University of Singapore represented the first region-focused academic journal. (A decade later, to expand its coverage, its name was changed to *Journal of SEAS*.) Both categories of SEAS and scholarly journals were developed in Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Brunei (Ooi 2009: 429-442).

#### **IV. Pioneers and Thinkers of SEAS**

Undeniably, foreign scholarship has dominated SEAS. Since the beginnings of the formal study of the region, scholars from beyond the region have dominated the field. In a cursory look at those designated as pioneers and thinkers in the discipline of the history of Southeast Asia, out of 28 scholars, 11 are local-born, in economics and political economy, 7 out of 13, and in politics and international relations, 2 from 12 (Ooi and King [in press]). Of the aforesaid 20 local scholars, all obtained their postgraduate studies from abroad, in other words, they were Western-trained scholars. A closer scrutiny of this pioneering group revealed a conspicuous absence of representation from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia (Ooi and King [in press]).

Moreover, besides the notable pioneers and critical thinkers who had brought forth path-breaking works to their respective fields, many other foreign scholars who came thereafter have pushed

further the boundaries of knowledge in SEAS in the last five decades. Kudos to their tireless efforts, SEAS has developed and advanced to its present commendable status.

Nevertheless, the momentum of increasing the numbers of Western-trained local scholars commenced in the immediate two decades after the war. Several of the aforementioned 20 local scholars were products of this initial wave in the 1950s and 1960s whereby increasing numbers of Southeast Asians pursued MAs and PhDs across academic disciplines in the UK, Europe, U.S., Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (see Ooi and King [in press]). From the 1970s and 1980s, Japan too became a destination for students of the region in both undergraduate and postgraduate studies.

In current times, however, there still remains a conspicuous lacuna of Southeast Asians in the international arena of Southeast Asianists. Should it not be opportune that there be more Southeast Asians as Southeast Asianists by this second decade of the 21st century? Two developments beg this question. Firstly, the field of SEAS has been developing for some eight decades (c. 1940s-2020s). Moreover, and secondly, there has been a proliferation of institutions of higher learning (colleges, universities) across the region since the 1980s and 1990s, and some of these tertiary centers have even attained world-class standings. Why then are there few local-born scholars attaining world-class reputations as Southeast Asianists?

## **V. Causal Factors for the Lacuna**

Between us, the present authors, local-born (Malaysia and Vietnam) and Western-trained (UK and U.S.), we have a collective experience of more than four decades of academic life in Southeast Asia itself in our home country respectively, our observations coupled with discussions with colleagues and others qualify us to suggest probable causal factors contributing to this aforesaid dire situation. We have identified three reasons, viz. language barrier, parochial and inward-looking mindset, and academic career in public universities, all interrelated and existing in parallel to be at first

glance appear as insurmountable challenges.

### 5.1 The Language Barrier

In contemporary times, whether you are a lecturer at the Universidad Peruana Cayetano Heredia, Lima, Peru lecturing in the prestigious tier one Zhejiang University in Hangzhou, Zhejiang, People's Republic of China (PRC), or a researcher at Cadi Ayyad University in Marrakesh, reputedly the largest university in Morocco, proficiency in the English language both oral and written is a prerequisite and a necessity for career development, survival, and elevation. Skilled command in the local language, Spanish, Mandarin, and Arabic or Moroccan Berber respectively *seemed irrelevant* as far as academic recognition in the international arena is concerned. For better or for worse, the demise of the British Empire in 1997 following the handover of Hong Kong to Beijing, did not see the “end” of the “empire.” On the contrary, the English language lost the pomp and splendor of Imperial Britain, not only is the uncrowned global language, but also, even more importantly, posed as the acknowledged *lingua franca* of academia. A frightening fact but true, as the following illustrates the contemporary reality.

Not only is April 23[rd] the anniversary of William Shakespeare's death, but the UN has chosen it as UN English Language Day in tribute to the Bard. If growth in the number of speakers is a measure of success, then the English language certainly deserves to be celebrated. Since the end of World War I [1914-1918], it has risen to become the language with the highest number of non-native users in the world and is the most frequently used language among people who don't share the same language in business, politics, and academia. *In universities in countries where English is not the official language, English is increasingly used as a medium of instruction and is often the preferred language for academics in which to publish their research.* In Europe alone, the number of undergraduate and master's programs fully taught in English grew from 2,389 in 2007 to 8,089 in 2014 – a 239% increase. ... In 1880, only 36% of publications were in English. It had risen to 50% in 1940-50, 75% in 1980, and 91% in 1996, with the numbers for social sciences and humanities slightly lower (Hultgren and Erling 2017, emphasis added).



Even more startling, there are “more students studying English in China than are studying English in the United States and more speakers of English in India than in Britain” itself (Altbach 2007:4). Such developments would at least bring a slight smile to the dour-looking Queen Victoria who had overseen the rise and heyday of the British Empire.

Moreover, the implications of the predominance of the English language are more formidable.

*English now serves unchallenged as the main international academic language.* Indeed, national academic systems enthusiastically welcome English as a contributor to internationalizing, competing, and becoming “world-class.” But the domination by English moves world science [and the humanities and social sciences] toward *hegemony led by the main English-speaking academic systems* [specifically U.S. and UK] (Altbach 2007: 4, emphasis added).

In the 1980s, university rankings became important, and each decade since, its importance has increased by leaps and bounds sending shivers and pushing the blood pressures of administrators to astronomical levels each year when the ranking results were announced. To be fair, the annual league table listing assists planners in the government in deciding the allocation of national funds to public universities for their research budget vis-à-vis research output (evidenced through publications). At the same time, university management could utilize the league tables to prioritize their future plans and strategy. Hence, whether it is the Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU, aka Shanghai Rankings, 2003), Quacquarelli Symonds (QS) World University Rankings (2004), or the *Times Higher Education* (THE) World University Rankings (2010), *publications in the English language is a major criterion component.* Undeniably, publications are reliable, transparent, and quantifiable, an infallible factor for serious consideration.

To cite the experience of Italian academic Christian De Vito, who recalled his time as an “honorary fellow” at the International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, in his own words, thus.

Every year, the institute held a presentation of the latest publications

by researchers from the institute. On the printed list prepared for this occasion, year after year, my publications in Italian were included in the category of “professional publications,” rather than on the list of “academic publications.” There I understood that in that context (and in the British one) *publications in English were the only ones that counted*. If I wanted access to that academic world, I basically had to start everything anew (De Vito 2021, emphasis added).

It is not the intention here to wade into the debate of English as the predominant medium in higher education, of its advantages and downsides, but suffice to emphasize here that this reality has to be faced as this trend is increasingly gaining strength decade-by-decade with scant possibilities of a *coup d'état* by, say Mandarin or Arabic or other alternatives. The saying “publish or perish” should be rewritten: “publish in *English* or perish”, a more apt aphorism in pursuing a successful (*read*: “world-class”) academic career. Otherwise, one remains as the Malay saying sarcastically termed it, *jaguh kampung*, the village champion.

The language barrier, non-conversant in English, appears to be a stumbling obstacle for most academics in Southeast Asia. With the notable exceptions of Singapore and Brunei. Elsewhere, English is relegated to a foreign language in the other nation-states across Southeast Asia. Since unshackling from colonial rule, some in violent armed struggles following decades or even centuries of degrading existence under Western powers, nationalism and nationalistic priorities dominated the national agenda. Indigenous languages were favored over “colonial” languages, whether Dutch, French, Spanish or English. Although upholding the indigenous language of Malay as the official national language, both Singapore and Brunei prudently employed English as the language of administration and education. Pragmatism appeared to be the motivation for the survival of the two microstates, and such a policy decision paid dividends in the long term. Both their flagship public universities, the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD) respectively enjoyed high ratings in the various university rankings (for instance, see University Rankings and Student Reviews n.d.; Top Universities n.d.).

But the advantages that Singapore or Brunei have in terms of English language prioritization do not exist in most other Southeast Asian nation-states, particularly those that are not former colonies of English-speaking colonial countries, such as Indonesia, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Take for example the case of Vietnam. In the history of Vietnam's educational development, many foreign languages were taught such as Chinese, French, Russian, and English. According to Nguyễn Thiện Giáp (2006), "Chính sách ngôn ngữ ở Việt Nam qua các thời kì lịch sử" (Language policy in Vietnam through historical periods), after the August Revolution (1945), Vietnam still maintained the teaching and learning of French and English. Before 1973, the state (Democratic Republic of Vietnam, or North Vietnam) established two universities to teach foreign languages and an institute to research foreign language teaching. From 1975<sup>1</sup> to the present, many foreign languages have been taught in Vietnam. Noticeably, since *Đổi Mới* the reform period from 1986 to strengthen its economic and political relations with the Asian region and across the world, especially since normalization with the U.S. in 1995, the demands for English have grown dramatically. Nguyễn Thiện Giáp observes that there have been foreign language universities, just to name a few: Hanoi University of Foreign Languages (1959) under the Ministry of Education and Training; University of Foreign Languages (1955) under Hanoi National University; Military University of Foreign Languages (1982), later merged to Military Science Academy (MSA), University of Foreign Languages (1985) under Đà Nẵng University (Central Vietnam); University of Foreign Languages and Information Technology (Ho Chi Minh City) (1992) and many foreign language departments at other universities and colleges. The Vietnamese government has also allowed the establishment of many foreign language training centers partially and fully operated by foreign organizations such as British Council, Apollo, and Language Link. Not only are English, French, Russian, and Chinese taught as foreign languages, but many other languages such as German, Chinese, etc. Japanese, Korean, Italian, Spanish, Malayu, Indonesian, Thai, and

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<sup>1</sup> Although Saigon fell in April 1975, the country was formally reunited in 1976 and renamed the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRVN), with Hà Nội as its capital.

even Arabic are also being taught at universities and foreign language centers in Vietnam.

Ngo and Tran (2023), in their detailed accounts of current English education in Vietnam, emphasize the connections between the development of English education and socio-economic, cultural, political, and technological changes in Vietnam since the *Đổi Mới* policy. According to these scholars, since Vietnam joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2007, English learning has become an urgent and ever-rising demand. Proficiency in English and other foreign languages is in great demand by a growing workforce wishing to join or operate in these joint venture companies and foreign direct investment enterprises or in the international trade sector in general. All embody Vietnam's readiness to embrace globalization and international integration.

Nevertheless, English language proficiency in Vietnam is "still low," due to the "huge gap" between government policies and their actual implementation "at the institutional, curriculum, and subject levels across education levels, including higher education" (Mai and Tran 2023: 49). According to Trần Thị Lan (2006), the low competency of foreign language has continuously reported in Vietnamese media agencies: "70% of Vietnamese students slip foreign languages," "more than half of students studying at international schools do not meet the minimum foreign language proficiency," "ten years of studying foreign languages in elementary school does not bring up any result." Trần Thị Lan explains that the low quality of foreign language training in Vietnam is the consequence of several factors: unclear learning objectives; lack of teaching facilities, and a "serious deficiency of qualified teachers."

This lack of comprehensiveness in English becomes more problematic when it comes to academics, given the language of academic communication requires specialized expressions, terminology, sentence structure, and organization. Specifically, English for academics is different from English for general communication and non-academic professions. Being able to communicate—in spoken or written form—in academic English requires specialized English training courses related to research

methods of each social sciences and humanities discipline.

Meanwhile, as one can see in the research by Mai and Tran (quoted above), English teaching and learning in Vietnam are designed to train Vietnamese citizens who can work for multinational companies or international economic and technical transactions. The goal of training scholars to research Vietnam and other countries in the region is almost absent from the goal of developing foreign languages, specifically English.

Writing represents the acquisition of the highest skill in a language. If the status of English is but a foreign language in most countries in Southeast Asia, its instruction follows TEFL (Teaching of English as a Foreign Language), much lower in skill acquisition than TESEL (Teaching of English as a Second Language). As the indigenous language is being prioritized, hence unsurprisingly, whether TEFL or TESEL, might be cursory. Under such circumstances, local scholars who could barely communicate in English are expected to publish scholarly works in English that qualify for publication in high-ranking academic journals, or penning books for consideration by elite academic publishing houses, both invariably are English-medium with superlative scholarly expectations. Such anticipations are totally unrealistic, but that seemed to be the reality on the ground. Unless their works have been translated into English from the vernacular, the scholarly outputs of local scholars barely go beyond the boundaries of their homeland. Consequently, even high-quality works in indigenous languages are overlooked by the international academic community that primarily focuses on English language publications. This situation presents one of the causes of the lacuna of Southeast Asians as Southeast Asianists in the global platform.

## **5.2 Inward-Looking Mindset**

Further aggravating the English language barrier, local scholars in the region have a tendency to adopt a parochial and inward-looking mindset. Related to language acquisition, most local scholars prefer focusing on their own nation-state rather than undertaking cross-border research. In other words, Thai academics would rather

carry out research within Thailand itself, and not venture, for instance, into Cambodia or Myanmar. Similarly, Indonesian scholars in Kalimantan even shy away from working on issues affecting neighboring Sarawak or Sabah, and vice versa. Likewise, academics in Brunei keep their work within the confines of the sultanate. Moreover, cross-border research collaboration in the region is the exception to the rule. It is unlikely to find Vietnamese economists working together with their Laotian counterparts, or joint research projects between Malaysians and Singaporeans despite their close proximity. Besides the communication barrier, conspicuous in the former and less hindered in the latter, there are other factors working against cross-border collaboration ASEAN notwithstanding.

National governments of the nation-states in the region are the largest source of research grants for local academics. Understandably, in providing the funding, national governments prioritized national concerns and local interests over regional issues. Funds from national governments appear to be the major source of research grants for most local academics. Success in securing highly competitive and prestigious research grants necessitates meeting the high criteria set by foreign grant bodies and international foundations which demand that one proves his/her international credentials as evidenced in a list of publications invariably in English-medium elite academic journals and/or books by prestigious publishing houses which published English language scholarly works for the global scholarly community dominated by English-speaking academics. Consequently, non-native English speakers in Southeast Asia (or elsewhere) face a seemingly insurmountable hurdle in breaking through to having their scholarly articles feature in top-tier academic journals or having a volume published by an international academic publisher. For many, they have declined publication, not only on language grounds (English is not up to par), but also owing to the narrow, local topics that might not resonate with an international scholarly community.

### **5.3 Academic Careers in Public Universities**

Universities across Southeast Asia are often public institutions, and

academics therein are civil servants. Career development and climbing the hierarchy are dependent on one's contribution to the national agenda, for instance, nation-building was and still is the mainstream theme for academics to pursue. Furthermore, having participated in national research grants, most research outputs feed into the national priority of nation-building. Fulfilling the national agenda helps in career advancement for civil servant-cum-lecturer.

... in Southeast Asia public universities outnumbered private colleges and, consequently, the scholarly community is dominated by the 'pro-government' faction. The majority of academics who teach and undertake research are greatly dependent on the state that ensures their salaries and continued employment and also holds the purse string of grants and research funding. It is therefore not surprising that university lecturers and professors tended to be inward-looking in their research activities; that is, they focus on issues and themes of national rather than regional concern or other interests. Joining the national bandwagon is convenient (access to funding) and at the same time profitable (promotions in the academic hierarchy) (Ooi 2009: 444).

Unless one could contextualize or situate one's specific localized study in a wider and global situation, top-tier academic journals and/or international academic publishers would not exhibit interest in your parochial work. The ability to transform or situate a local issue into a global context and relevancy requires a load of research work beyond one's national boundaries, even outside the region.

Therefore, as has been shown, a combination of non-English proficiency coupled with parochial and inward-looking mindsets which are reinforced by official and institutional structures in terms of access to research grants and the prioritization of national over regional interests worked against the emergence of local scholars being internationally recognized and acknowledged as Southeast Asianists. Although it seemed to be an ironic twist in developments, the practical reality (non-English proficiency) and pragmatism on the part of indigenous academics (*vis-à-vis* the organizational and structural background) in terms of career sustainability and advancement, even in this second decade of the current century

there remained a glaring paucity of Southeast Asians becoming Southeast Asianists on the world stage.

## VI. The Case for Southeast Asians Becoming Southeast Asianists

But why the fuss of having home-grown scholars in the international arena of scholarship? In having research findings published in the vernacular in local journals that addressed local and nation-building needs be more than adequate and sufficient in fulfilling national requirements, hence what else is wanting?

We hold the opinion of the importance of native scholars excelling as Southeast Asianists, not to challenge or counter their foreign colleagues in the field, but more precisely, and even more importantly, *to provide the complementary side of an insider's perspective to the foreign outsider's viewpoint*. Therefore, in this complementarily role of local and non-local scholars, both their respective contributions *would provide a more holistic picture and viewpoint to the study of Southeast Asia in the various academic disciplines*. A win-win situation here is proposed, and not, a zero-sum game. Local-born scholars might have the advantage of insight over their foreign counterparts hence this insider's perspective might prove invaluable and useful. Certain behaviors of locals, be it the man-in-the-street or the prime minister, could only be understood and explained against the background of the local cultural milieu, therefore foreign scholars might "miss," "overlook," or even "disregard" such local idiosyncrasies, and or even misinterpret and misunderstand, far worse than not understanding such nuanced behaviors. Moreover, local interests and local concerns might be more appealing to local academics rather than foreign scholars. There is more intimacy and concern on the part of the local academic about local situations, conditions, peculiarities, and local mindset. It does not mean that foreign academics lack empathy, on the contrary, there is a thin line of difference between "outsiders" and "insiders."

Take for instance in the field of the teaching and research of Southeast Asian literature. This field is largely conducted by scholars



who are non-Southeast Asians or even members of the Southeast Asian diaspora who grew up and educated entirely in educational and academic environments outside the region. Pham and Jayaraman (2022) explicitly address this matter in their introduction to a theme issue of Vietnamese literature, “Vietnamese Literature: Diverse Reading by the Inside. This special issue aims to promote aspects of the inside perspective on Vietnamese literature that is different from the way this literature is approached from outside Vietnam. This aim is significant, particularly given the fact that courses, modules, and publications about Vietnamese literature outside Vietnam have been largely conducted by non-Vietnamese academics and/or by Vietnamese academics who have grown up and have their education in diasporic contexts. In other words, the differences and diversity in political, cultural, and educational backgrounds of these academics have shaped the international public’s perspective and interpretation of Vietnamese literature. Notably, these worldwide spread views that do not always reflect the cultural, and political logic of literary lives and works from inside Vietnam itself. Consequently, it also means that *perspectives and approaches from inside Vietnam form only a minor point of reference in the international scholarship of Vietnamese literatures*. The inability and unwillingness to publish outside Vietnam among Vietnamese academics in literary studies, due to cultural, political, and educational reasons also cause the absence of perspectives of Vietnamese literature from the inside in international academic settings. The resulting universal image of Vietnamese literature occurs reductively as either allegories of political and social conflicts, or as reflections of the exotic.

There have been efforts by non-Southeast Asian scholars and Southeast Asian scholars to include the voices of the region’s scholars in the scholarship about Southeast Asia. Take scholarship about Vietnam as an example. French and American scholars are normally recognized as those who put much effort into developing studies of Vietnam in various social sciences and humanities disciplines. The marginal presence of scholars in Vietnam in the history of Vietnam studies seems to be aware by Keith and Schwenkel (2021), two scholars of Vietnam studies from the U.S.,

when they recognize the increasingly long-standing scholarly connection and engagement between non-Vietnamese scholars and Vietnamese scholars in freeing Vietnamese studies from colonial and Cold War preconceptions (Keith and Schwenkel 2021: 1). They co-edited the special issue entitled “Global Vietnam Studies” in *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 16.1 (2021) apparently in efforts of rewriting the colonial and imperial history of Vietnam studies. The inclusion of non-American and French scholars’ historiographies of Vietnam-centric scholarship in this special issue demonstrates the diversity and dynamism of Vietnamese research in different parts of the world viz. Germany, Russia, Japan, China, and Thailand. “Two eyes are *better* than one” is apt in this context. Nevertheless, the absence of contributions by scholars from Vietnam in this issue including various histories of Vietnamese studies posed a great drawback.

In Pham and Jayaraman (2022), there are interpretations of individual Vietnamese literary works by academics from Vietnam. They are local-born Vietnamese who had their tertiary education in Vietnam itself. They are serving either as researchers or academics and professors in public academic institutions in Vietnam. Although not native to English, the contributors possess knowledge of English to access theories in literary studies as well as to interpret literary works in the English language. The cultural, educational, and political backgrounds of these home-grown academics make their interpretations of Vietnamese literature distinct from internationally conventional perceptions. Moreover, regardless of their shared educational background, it is the difference in academic and cultural backgrounds of the two guest editors, notably Pham and Jayaraman that brings up diverse perspectives of Vietnamese literature in an international academic journal.

Chi Pham grew up and studied in socialist schools in Vietnam and currently is a researcher in literary studies at a government academic agency in Hanoi. She undertook post-graduate studies and post-doctoral research in the U.S. and Germany and was influenced by post-colonial criticism of literature and nation. Indian-born Uma Jayaraman obtained her undergraduate and Master’s degrees from her homeland. Subsequently, she pursued doctoral studies in gender

performance and diaspora writings in Singapore. Besides being a creative writer and theater practitioner, Jayaraman is an instructor in academic writing in arts and social sciences, curating presentations, and workplace communication at the National University of Singapore (Jayaraman n.d.). Jayaraman does not have any experience with Vietnamese literature. The editorial combination of Pham and Jayaraman with such diverse ethnic, educational, and academic backgrounds brought forth a different perspective of Vietnamese literature, far from the scholarship from inside Vietnam and/or beyond.

Furthermore, in the field of literary studies, another illustration of Southeast Asians becoming Southeast Asianists can be drawn from an international conference themed, “Southeast Asian Comparative Literature: Histories, Theories, and Practices” at the Institute of Literature, Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences (VASS), and University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam National University, Hanoi on December 14, 2023. Specifically, the one-day conference brought together the region’s comparatists scholars to deliberate and consider the possibilities of approaching modern and contemporary Southeast Asian literatures. The participants engaged in the comparative study of ethnic, cultural, social, gender, and artistic issues pertaining to contemporary postcolonial Southeast Asian societies.

As a result, the conference’s aim moved beyond the conventional means of undertaking comparative literature research in Vietnam, in other words, surmised as comparing a work of Vietnamese literature to a work from a culture that has had a big influence on Vietnam such as the U.S., France, Russia, China and more recently, South Korea. Discussions and conversations among Southeast Asian scholars of their respective national literatures and their shared themes introduced new perspectives and frameworks that are distinct from Western comparatists. Such research direction has *the potential to expose* Western scholars and students to diverse regional intellectuality thereby encouraging them to critically think about intellectual frameworks and perspectives besides what they have learnt in the West.

The third illustrative example is of the scholarship of Vietnamese literature by Montira Rato of Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, a participant in the above-mentioned conference who is a convincing case of a Southeast Asian as a Southeast Asianist. Possessing postgraduate training at the School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS), University of London, majoring in modern and contemporary Vietnamese literature, Rato who was born, and raised with a pre-university educational background in her homeland Thailand, not only has a comprehensive knowledge of Vietnamese (written and spoken), but also has experience in presenting and publishing academic research in English. Her research on Vietnamese literature is both close to and different from the approach of her Vietnamese counterparts in Vietnam. Her rather advantageous position of “in-between” is a consequence of having a very long connection with scholars in Vietnam while at the same time being exposed to and indulged in new theories and methods in the humanities thanks to her educational background and exceptional English knowledge. This “in-between” advantage allows research to be unique and meaningful in the international arena of modern Vietnamese literature. Her research covers diverse topics in Vietnamese literature such as war trauma, land reform resentment, history, social class, urbanization, and ideological conflict. For example, in “Land Reform in Vietnamese Literature” (2004) and “Peasants and the Countryside in Post-1975 Vietnamese Literature” (2003), she indicates that class struggle still prevails in post-socialist literature. She asserts that the presence of peasant characters in Vietnamese literature signifies the Vietnamese nation-makers’ strategy of population mobilization for the national revolution. In the research “The Decline of socialist realism in post-1975 Vietnamese Literature” (2007), she points out that individual struggles form the most intensive theme in contemporary Vietnamese literature. In another article (2005), “Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s Historical Short Story: A Challenge to Vietnamese Historiography in The Renovation Period,” she argues that post-socialist Vietnamese literature embraces public resistance to Marxist-Leninism-oriented writing of nation. She asserts that the presence of peasant characters in Vietnamese literature signifies the Vietnamese nation-makers’ strategy of population mobilization for

the national revolution. As such, Rato brings new interpretations to classic Vietnamese literature with postcolonial criticism that she must have observed with her postgraduate training in comparative literature in the UK.

Meanwhile, a pivotal and significant role is played by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies<sup>2</sup> at the Busan University of Foreign Studies (ISEAS-BUFS) in facilitating Southeast Asian scholars to transit as Southeast Asianists. ISEAS-BUFS's annual conferences and its peer-reviewed *SUVANNABHUMI: Multi-disciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*<sup>3</sup> provide both a public forum and publishing outlet respectively to academics from Southeast Asia. For more than a decade, with support from the National Research Foundation of Korea, ISEAS-BUFS organized annual international conferences on various themes in Southeast Asia. ISEAS-BUFS as conference organizer afforded two avenues and opportunities for scholars from Southeast Asia. Firstly, a selected pool of participants (paper presenters whose papers were consistent with the conference's theme) is generously provided with flight and accommodation for their attendance; a city tour of Busan is the post-conference outing for all participants. If not for this largesse, most academics from Southeast Asia (except Singapore and Brunei) are often ineligible for overseas seminars and conferences due to financial impediments. For many Southeast Asian scholars from developing countries, participation in overseas conferences is mere pipe dream.

Moreover, and secondly, the flexibility and respect exhibited by ISEAS-BUFS for the uneven English proficiency of scholars from the region is a plus factor in attracting participation. As Southeast Asians generally form the majority of conference participants, there is less inhibition among paper presenters if their English is wanting. Besides, the presence of a handful of Korean and Japanese scholars who numbered among the other non-English native speakers further provides an agreeable ambiance to Southeast Asians self-conscious of their English-speaking ability.

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<sup>2</sup> Presently called Korean Institute of ASEAN Studies (KIAS-BUFS).

<sup>3</sup> Scopus-listed since 2022.

The journal *SUVANNABHUMI* as the publishing outlet of the revised working papers from the conference has been less stringent in English proficiency, and in turn, many of the papers underwent peer review. Guided by the principle that contents and substance are more important than the language medium (English), proofreaders and copyeditors addressed the shortcomings.

According to our observations, it seems ISEAS-BUFS and *SUVARNABHUMI* are conducting an unspoken anti-imperial, decolonizing effort in their way of making English less of a barrier to non-Western academics' research development. Rightfully English should not be an obstacle that prevents non-native English-speakers such as Southeast Asianists of the region from presenting and publishing their research findings. Scholars who do not have English as their mother tongue or official language are invited to serve as members of the editorial advisory board of *SUVARNABHUMI*, that in turn, allows Southeast Asians as Southeast Asianist to be more visible in the international arena of SEAS. In other words, ISEAS-BUFS together with *SUVARNABHUMI* had contributed, and continue to contribute in making Southeast Asian scholars more present in international academic forums beyond their region.

The program for SEAS at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Hanoi National University is an embodiment at best of a potential ideal model of how to train home-grown Southeast Asianists. In addition to mandatory language courses in Bahasa Indonesia and Thai, English forms an essential language component of the training program. The presence of advanced English subjects according to the European framework and mandatory specialized English courses on social, cultural, historical, and economic aspects of Southeast Asia further enriched the program. The required courses for undergraduates demonstrate the efforts in developing future generations of home-grown Southeast Asianists to feature on the global stage of SEAS (Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội 2023). Not being able to acquire English, especially academic English, makes home-grown Southeast Asianists non-visible and non-audible on the world academic forums of SEAS. Therefore, intensive academic English acquisition is a deciding factor for Southeast Asians becoming Southeast Asianists.

## VII. Conclusion

It is undeniable that English is still a prerequisite for a Southeast Asian researcher in the region to become academically visible beyond national borders. Nevertheless, the case of Southeast Asians in the region described above suggests an ideal condition for Southeast Asians to become Southeast Asianists: acquiring both English and the native languages of the region (the language of the culture she/he is an expert of) and having a hybrid educational background. It is because there are undeniable historical things about SEAS as a scientific discipline. Specifically, as mentioned above, the establishment of SEAS is inseparable from the political and military purposes of the U.S. in wartime; the development of this discipline is mainly due to the contributions of scholars trained and worked at Western academic institutions; Southeast Asianists of the region are mostly trained in Western academic institutions therefore the majority remained steadfast to Western methods and theories. What is especial about SEAS undertaken by scholars from the region itself is that they were born, grew up, educated, and worked in social, cultural, and academic environments of their homeland, hence all of this background and experiences must potentially influence the way such home-grown scholars adopt Western theories and methods which influence their studies of the region. In other words, Southeast Asianists of the region are in the ambiguous and rather fluid condition of being both insiders as well as outsiders to the region where they conduct their research. The precarious situation relating to theories, research methods, and academic traditions makes research conducted and presented by Southeast Asians as Southeast Asianists unique and disparate compared to one by non-Southeast Asian scholars. Southeast Asians as Southeast Asianists undoubtedly contribute in enriching SEAS in whatever discipline at the national, regional, and global level.

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