

Keynote Speech

Southeast Asian Studies in the Age of Disruption, STEM and Hyper-utilitarianism

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Over the past century, the emergence and development of area studies, including Asian and Southeast Asian studies, have been in the contexts of colonialism and the Cold War. Those conditions have gone.

In the past few decades, area studies have been facing an epochal challenge both from within the scholarly community and from without: from the devaluation of area studies in the Euro-American academies, to the rise of Asian academies and of area studies in Asia, and from the disappearing geo-political rationale for area studies, the urgency of the global and transnational/ transregional issues, to the emergence of the technology-driven transformation of the global society – the “Age of Disruption”.

In these new conditions, the global higher education today is caught in two paradoxes: 1) While the technology-led transformation of the world needs a workforce with critical and innovative abilities, higher education becomes more hyper-utilitarian; 2) While the global cultures are increasingly (not decreasingly) diverse, many countries thrive for STEM education at the expense of learning languages and cultures, including area studies which are essential for diversity.

A new kind of area studies and Southeast Asian studies must respond to these new conditions. These changing conditions and paradoxes, nevertheless, take different forms and degrees in the American, European and Asian academies, thanks to their different histories of higher education. The prospects for Southeast Asian studies in these various academies are likely to be different too.

What are these prospects for Southeast Asian studies in Asia?