

3rd Presentation

**Vietnam at the Crossroads of Area and Global Studies:
Changing Landscape of Knowledge Production on Southeast Asia**

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Area studies is generally believed in a crisis because of emerging Global and International Studies and driving forces of globalization. Southeast Asian studies is expecting to face the struggle of reconstructing its institution, theoretical approach and geographical shift. Taking the field in Australia, Europe, and Northern America, for instance, governmental and public fund to Southeast Asian studies institutions is declining. So is intellectual and social interests in the field. The tremendous staff and budget cut at Australian National University (ANU), College of Asia and the Pacific (2015) will not be the last of the trend. In contrast, new dynamic forces are prevailing in Asia in general and Southeast Asia in particular where regional governments and universities eagerly promote new understanding about the region and seek to produce the kind of knowledge that they hope will serve better to the Southeast Asian interests.

For the revitalization of area studies, enormous efforts have been paid to integrate varied bodies of knowledge generated by academic disciplines, interdiscipline, multidiscipline, transnational, international, and global studies. The community of Southeast Asianists now destines new roles to play:

1. Creating new knowledge about Southeast Asia that not only designs for the taste of western audience, but increasingly relevant and engaged with Southeast Asians.
2. Redefining the region in the global context, translating regional administrative institutions (ASEAN, ...) and political messages into broader and inclusive regional identity of sharing culture, history, and value that not only embody on durian, stilt-house, or man of prowess, but ideas that are able to inspire people who celebrate and attach themselves to that identity.
3. Constructing new institutions and approaches for the field with greater theoretical sophistication in context of the digital age; at the same time, translating and uploading knowledge of Southeast Asia into multi-media platform so it can reach a wider audience.

How Vietnamese academic community responds to the challenge? This paper then sheds some light upon the state of the field in Vietnam. By recognizing the changing intellectual landscape and regional context that demand producing a new kind of “regional knowledge,” I suggest that Vietnamese scholars are not ready, and still trap in the post-Cold War transitional ideology. The

state's tight control of research on social sciences and humanities limits intellectual capacity to tackle sensitive and important issues of the region, while public discourse is fueled with nationalism. The result, I argue, is a body of nationalist and Viet-centric knowledge about Southeast Asia. The traditional imperial perspective and Cold War-mindset still dominate the way Vietnamese view the region, particularly countries such as Laos, Cambodia, and Thailand. Such knowledge is unhealthy because it distracts Vietnamese from updated understanding about the region and creates anxiety in Vietnamese attitude towards their neighbors. The future direction of Southeast Asian Studies in Vietnam therefore depends on how Vietnamese are able to relocate themselves within the region and actively engage with the project of regional integration.

Finally, it is the time to make Southeast Asian Studies great again. Not a daydream of returning to the Cold War's good old days, but to transform the field itself into a new epistemological paradigm. It is a new type of area studies of more flexible, inclusive, and "high-tech" in term of institution, theories, and medium of communication. In doing so, Southeast Asian Studies must engage with audiences in Southeast Asia, and focuses more on the interests of regional societies. I offer some keywords/ agendas for the future direction of the field: 1. Redefining Southeast Asia through de-nationalism, internationalization, and cross-border perspective; 2. Presenting new characters of regional identity; 3. Recognizing the "losers" in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Southeast Asian Studies, Global Studies, Vietnamese history, Southeast Asia.