



# From Southeast Asian Studies to ASEAN Studies: What's in a Name Change?



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## [ *Abstract* ]

This paper is a preliminary attempt at making sense of the increasingly common use of the term ASEAN Studies as interchangeable with, or as replacement for the older and more established counterpart. It speculates on whether this development represents the beginning among local people of “owning” the region, as well as whether this forms part of the continuing effort to wrest the initiative or control of knowledge production in and about Southeast Asia.

**Keywords:** Area Studies, Institutional Studies, Southeast Asia, ASEAN

## I . Introduction

The boom in ASEAN Studies in recent years marks an intriguing development in Southeast Asian Studies. This boom is evident in the proliferation of ASEAN Studies in various universities and research institutes across the region. Five Open Universities in the region<sup>1</sup>,

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for instance, have collaborated to develop and offer ASEAN Studies at the graduate certificate or MA level. Earlier on, Thammasat University and University of Malaya have established their respective International Masters programs in ASEAN Studies<sup>2</sup>. A PhD in ASEAN Studies program has also been established at the Naresuan University in northern Thailand.<sup>3</sup> It is probably the first of its kind, at least in name. At the Bachelor level, majorship in ASEAN Studies has also begun to be instituted, as exemplified by the BA in ASEAN Studies at the Prince of Songkla University (PSU) in Thailand.<sup>4</sup>

ASEAN Studies research centres have also multiplied<sup>5</sup>, with emphasis on policy-oriented research and in facilitating academic exchange and collaboration. The ASEAN Studies Centre at the Institutes of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak) in Singapore is possibly the oldest and most developed example of this effort in the region.<sup>6</sup> In Indonesia such centres were reportedly established in five universities, namely Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM), Universitas Indonesia (UI) Universitas Andalas (Unand), Universitas Airlangga (Unair), and Universitas Hassanudin (Unhas). In Thailand, a similar facility was set up in Chulalongkorn University, National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA), Chiang Mai University, Prince of Songkla University, Khon Kaen University, among others. In the Philippines, New Era University established such a center in 2016 which was the first in the country.<sup>7</sup> Beyond

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<sup>1</sup> Universitas Terbuka (Indonesia), Open University of Malaysia, Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University (Thailand), the Hanoi Open University (Vietnam) and the UP Open University (Philippines).

<sup>2</sup> For University of Malaya's (UM) programme, see [https://www.um.edu.my/academics/master/asia-europe/international-masters-in-asean-studies-\(imas\)](https://www.um.edu.my/academics/master/asia-europe/international-masters-in-asean-studies-(imas)) and for Thammasat University, see <http://www.pbic.tu.ac.th/asean/> (Accessed April 4, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> See the program website, <https://cacs.nu.ac.th/academics/phd-program/> (Accessed April 4, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> See the program website <https://fis.psu.ac.th/en/index.php/course/ba/asean-studies/> (Accessed August 10, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> According to ASEAN Foundation website, there are 18 ASEAN Studies Centres as of Nov. 2013, <http://aseanfoundation.org/newsroom/asean-studies-centres-gear-up-to-establish-its-network> (Accessed April 14, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/centres/asean-studies-centre> (Accessed April 14, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.neu.edu.ph/main/asean-studies-center-and-center-for-international-linkages/>, <http://www.eaglenews.ph/neu-asean-studies-center-launched/> (accessed on 2 August 2018).

the region, Josai University in Japan put up its own ASEAN Studies center in 2015, while in India it was inaugurated in 2016 in Shillong, in northeast India.<sup>8</sup> Earlier in 2009, the American University launched the ASEAN Studies Forum. It was a pioneering effort in North America.<sup>9</sup> In Europe, the University of Antwerp in Belgium established an institute called ASEAN Studies Center. Having been established in 1994, it is possibly the earliest outside the region. In the case of the academic journals, ASEAN Studies has also been explicitly used as part of the title—in *Journal of ASEAN Studies* by Indonesia's Bina Nusantara University (BINUS).<sup>10</sup>

Given the fairly long institutional and academic history of Southeast Asian Studies as a field of studies (Abdullah and Maunati 1998; Baviera, Tadem, and Malay 2003; Bowen 2004; Hirschman, Keyes, and Hutterer 1992; Park and King 2013; Reid and Diokno 2003), this recent development raises intriguing questions. Why ASEAN Studies rather than the long-standing name Southeast Asian Studies? Is it not the case that the long provenance of Southeast Asian Studies as a field of study already provides a well-tested structure and conventions that are suitable for the purpose? Are newly-instituted ASEAN Studies programs significantly different to merit the name change?

One may say that opting for ASEAN Studies is understandable because it suits the focus on ASEAN as an institution or international organization, not on Southeast Asia as a whole. The MA in ASEAN Studies programs offered by Thammasat University and University of Malaya, for example, seem to be largely institutional studies in orientation, with emphasis on ASEAN as an international organization. In this sense, ASEAN is taken as a subset of the bigger entity Southeast Asia. It is relevant to ask whether a demarcation line may be drawn between ASEAN Studies as a form of institutional studies, on the one hand, and Southeast Asian Studies as a conventional area studies, on the other. Pending a close

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<sup>8</sup> See the institute's website, <http://ascshillong.org/> (Accessed August 2, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> See the website of the ASEAN Studies Initiative, <http://www.american.edu/sis/aseanstudiesinitiative/> (Accessed August 2, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> See *Journal of ASEAN Studies* by Bina Nusantara University in Indonesia, <http://journal.binus.ac.id/index.php/jas/> (Accessed August 2, 2018).

examination of the contents of various ASEAN Studies programs, and comparing them with their counterparts, which I will try to do in a preliminary manner in the next section, the purported area-organizational studies divide can only be conjectural.

Others take the name change as meaning nothing really significant. With Timor Leste the only remaining non-member in the region, and its membership is likely to be realized sooner or later anyway, Southeast Asia and ASEAN are in many ways practically co-terminus. The apparently significant overlap between the contents and structure of the ASEAN Studies program offered by the five open universities noted above, and those of “conventional” Southeast Studies programs, as will be shown below, seems to support this observation. It should also be noted that this name change is possibly a pragmatic move, riding on the hype surrounding the launch of the ASEAN Community in 2015, as noted by Charnvit Kasetsiri (Kasetsiri 2013).

The aim of this paper is two-fold. It seeks to assess in a preliminary way the viability of the area studies-institutional studies divide. I also wish to speculate if there could be something more substantive in the rise of ASEAN Studies beyond the hype and pragmatism generated by the launch of the ASEAN Community? I recall van Schendel’s insights on “geographies of knowing” and the “geographies of ignorance” that it engenders (van Schendel 2002). These ideas refer to the power of geographic concepts such as region or nation to frame and organize knowledge production in ways that includes, enables and empowers certain groups but simultaneously excludes, prevents and emasculates others that subscribe to different ways of knowing. Given that Southeast Asian Studies is a long-established and largely externally-driven enterprise, one may be tempted to guess if the use of ASEAN Studies as nomenclature heralds the coming to the surface of the impulses that have fairly deep historical groundings within the region. These impulses are rooted in the region’s decolonizing history—the kind of history that seeks to wrest from outsiders the control over a range of things including the engine of knowledge production.

## II . Area versus Institutional Studies?

The development of area studies such as Southeast Asian Studies in the USA is usually traced to the war-related efforts to “understand the enemy” during the Second World War and the subsequent Cold war era (Bowen 2004; Szanton 2004a). While one can argue for a much earlier provenance, going back to the colonial, pre-colonial or even classical periods (Hall 1947; Mojares 2013; Reid and Diokno 2003; Winichakul 2005), much of the development of Southeast Asian Studies as we know it today was to an extent driven by the needs or interests since the 1940s of extra-regional players, such as American and European colonial administrators, military strategists, intelligence agencies and university-based and think-tank-based scholars. This kind of area studies, at least that which developed in the USA, may be characterized by the shared commitment to some, if not all, of the following features (Szanton 2004: 4)

(1) intensive language study; (2) in-depth field research in the local language(s); (3) close attention to local histories, viewpoints, materials, and interpretations; (4) testing, elaborating, critiquing, or developing grounded theory against detailed observation; and (5) multi-disciplinary conversations often crossing the boundaries of the social sciences and humanities.

The emphasis on the study of a foreign language and on in-depth research using vernacular sources is premised on the presumed depth required to uncover some distinctive features (in addition to shared characteristics) of a particular area. The logic of cultural systems that are operative in an area is believed to be embedded in linguistic codes, hence the need for language competence. Moreover, because of the inherent complexity of reality on the ground, none among the various disciplines can capture it by itself. This is why an effective multi-disciplinary or interdisciplinary approach is called for. This humanistic, liberal side of area studies coincides and, at the same time, is in tension with the more pragmatic, politically-driven impulses to use linguistic competence and other area studies practices to “know the enemy” more accurately and deeply. One can argue that the rather uneasy alliance between scholarly, for-public good ideals of liberal scholars, on the

one hand, and the pragmatic aims of the conservative elements in the government enabled to a significant degree the development of area studies in the USA. The controversy in the late 1960s and 1970s surrounding the birth of the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars (CCAS) and its breakaway journal, the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* (BCAS, since 2000 *Critical Asian Studies*) seems to have exemplified clearly the tensions between two competing, but in some ways also complementary, impulses that undergirded the development of area studies in the USA (Lanza 2017).

The characteristics noted above define what may be considered as “conventional” area studies in the USA. This label is at best of limited heuristic value; it is no more than a convenient aggregation or fossilization of the otherwise varied, changing and complex practices. Nonetheless, it helps drive home an important point: as a “contingent device” (Sutherland 2005) area studies in various parts of the world, such as the USA, UK, continental Europe, Australia, Japan, China, Korea and Southeast Asia, are shaped by the confluence of different and changing contextual matrices in their respective contexts.

To what extent, if ever, are these features reflected among Southeast Asian Studies programs in Southeast Asia? As a methodological preface, the choice of cases to be examined here was informed mainly by the accessibility or availability of data, not by carefully considered criteria for importance or representativeness. Be that as it may, the Southeast Asian Studies programs at the National University of Singapore (NUS), University of Malaya (UM), and Chulalongkorn University and the University of the Philippines-Diliman (UP-D) are arguably important in their own right in terms of distinctive features or levels of prestige and development, even if their inclusion here was prompted mainly by the accessibility via internet of detailed information about their programs.

In terms of multi- or interdisciplinarity, all programs as specified in Table A qualify. What they varied in is the extent of emphasis on certain discipline-clusters. University of Malaya’s (UM) version, is characteristically emphatic on economy, development,

management, and trade issues whereas NUS’s curriculum is rather sparing on this aspect. While UM does not have a module on the history of Southeast Asia, and only a few modules on culture and the humanities, NUS, on the other hand, is heavily concentrated on history, humanities and anthropology. This point must be tempered by the fact that the undergraduate program on Southeast Asian Studies at NUS offers several modules from a wide arrange of relevant disciplines.

To an extent the same may be said of UM’s undergraduate program on Southeast Asian Studies. The versions of the MA in Southeast Asian Studies (in the case of UP, major in Southeast Asia under the broader frame of MA in Asian Studies) offered by Chulalongkorn and UP-D appear to provide a fairly balanced coverage of social science and humanities disciplines. Focusing on the MA level programs alone, without regard to undergraduate module offerings, it may be said that UM, followed by NUS, are the least multi-disciplinary among the four.

<Table 1> MA in Southeast Asian Studies

	<b>National University of Singapore (NUS)<sup>11</sup></b>	<b>University of Malaya (UM)<sup>12</sup></b>	<b>Chulalongkorn University<sup>13</sup></b>	<b>University of the Philippines<sup>14</sup></b>
Core Courses	SE5151 Approaches to the Study of Southeast Asia	ATGH6101 Theories and Methods of Comparative Development in Southeast Asia ATGH6102 Research Method in the Social Sciences ATGH6103 Regionalism in Southeast Asia	2015 704 Southeast Asian Civilization 2015 706 Modern Southeast Asia: Colonialism, Nationalism, and Democratization 2015 708 ASEAN in Regional and Global Context 2015 710 Research Methodology in Southeast Asian Studies	201 Asia in Antiquity. 201–A Modern Asia. 210 Theories and Perspectives on Area Studies 299- Thesis Required Major modules (SEA Studies stream) 250 Seminar on Southeast Asia 255.1 Social and Economic Development in Southeast Asia 255.2 Politics and Governance in Southeast Asia 255.3 Culture and

				<p>Society in Southeast Asia</p> <p>256 International Relations of Southeast Asia and ASEAN</p> <p>Note: It is also required to meet proficiency requirement in a SEA language. Offered at the Asian Center are the following:</p> <p>Intensive Bahasa Indonesia/Malaysia</p> <p>Intensive Thai</p>
Electives	<p>SE5201 Supervised Research Project</p> <p>SE5211 Socio-Economic History of Southeast Asia</p> <p>SE5213 Revolt and Revolution in Southeast Asia</p> <p>SE5219 Technopolitics in Southeast Asia</p> <p>SE5222 The Arts in Contemporary Southeast Asia</p> <p>SE5223 History of Sexuality in Asia</p> <p>SE5224 Religion and Society In Southeast Asia</p> <p>SE5226 Race and Ethnicity In Southeast Asia</p> <p>SE5229 Anthropological Approaches to Southeast Asia</p> <p>SE5232 Southeast Asia and Regionalism</p> <p>SE5233 Economies of Southeast Asia</p> <p>SE5234 The Political Economy of Southeast Asia</p>	<p>ATGH6302 Economic Development in Southeast Asia</p> <p>ATGH6304 Trade, Port and Shipping in Southeast Asia</p> <p>ATGH6305 Politics and Regional Governance of Southeast Asia</p> <p>ATGH6311 Regional Economic Co-operation in Southeast Asia</p> <p>ATGH6312 Worker and Employment in Southeast Asia</p> <p>ATGH6313 Economic Development of Maritime Communities in Southeast Asia</p> <p>ATGH6314 Management of Coastal Environment and Marine Resource in Southeast Asia</p> <p>ATGH6315 Management of Tourism Development in Southeast Asia</p> <p>ATGH6316 Urbanisation of</p>	<p>2015 712 State and Society in Mainland Southeast Asia</p> <p>2015 714 Local Autonomy in Southeast Asia</p> <p>2015 715 Southeast Asian Arts and Culture</p> <p>2015 716 Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia</p> <p>2015 718 Regionalism and Regional Organizations in Southeast Asia</p> <p>2015 720 Ecology and Nature in Mainland Southeast Asia</p> <p>regional movement environmental conservation.</p> <p>3(3-0-9)</p> <p>2015 721 Urbanization in Southeast Asia</p> <p>2015 722 Southeast Asian Values and Worldview</p> <p>2015 724 Gender in Southeast Asia</p> <p>2015 726 Globalization and Local Identity in Southeast Asia</p> <p>2015 727 Human Rights in the</p>	<p>202 The East-West Encounter</p> <p>203 Nationalism and National Development</p> <p>204 Agrarian Development and the Peasantry in Asia</p> <p>205 Industrialization and Urban Development in Asia</p> <p>206 Philosophies and Religions of Asia</p> <p>207 Arts of Asia</p> <p>208 Socialism and Capitalism in Asia</p> <p>211 Security Issues in the Asia Pacific</p> <p>212 Regionalism and Community Building in Asia.</p> <p>252 Readings on Southeast Asia I.</p> <p>253 Readings on Southeast Asia II.</p> <p>Note: there seems to be many more electives both from Asian Studies and Philippine Studies programs that students can choose from, but in the absence of clear, accessible guidelines</p>



SE5241 Country Studies: Mainland Southeast Asia	Southeast Asia ATGH6301 Arts and Cultures of Southeast Asia	Southeast Asian Context 2015 728	on the extent of elective modules which students may choose from, I decided not to include them here.
SE5242 Country Studies: Thailand	ATGH6303 Population and Demography in Southeast Asia	Multilingualism in Southeast Asia	
SE5243 Country Studies: Indonesia	ATGH6306 Language and Society in Southeast Asia	2015 730 Southeast Asian Landscape and Society	
SE5244 Country Studies: The Philippines	ATGH6307	2015 731 Literature and Society in Southeast Asia	
SE5245 Country Studies: Malaysia	Ethnography and Belief Systems in Southeast Asia	2015 732 Folklore in Southeast Asia	
SE5246 Country Studies: Myanmar	ATGH6308	2015 734 Southeast Asian Theatre and Film	
SE5247 Country Studies: Vietnam	Comparative Religions in Southeast Asia	2015 735 The Politics of the Narcotics Trade in Southeast Asia	
SE5263 Cultural Resource Management in Southeast Asia	ATGH6309 Culture and Politics in Southeast Asia	2015 736 Islam in Southeast Asia	
SE5264 Archaeology and Art Of Ancient Southeast Asia	ATGH6317	2015 738 Vietnam from the Colonial Period to the Present	
SE5294 The Politics of Environment In Se Asia	Gender Systems in Southeast Asia	2015 739 Vietnamese Communism	
SE5660 Independent Study		2015 740	
SE5880 Topics in Southeast Asian Studies		Traditionalism, Revolution, and Consolidation in Cambodia	
		2015 742 Myanmar as a Militaristic State	
		2015 743 Buddhism and Spiritualism in Myanmar	
		2015 744 External Impact and Cultural Integration in the Making of the Laotian State	
		2015 746 Islamic Tradition, Modernization and Race Relations in Malaysia	
		2015 747 Current Research on	

			Southeast Asia 2015 748 Seminar on Southeast Asia 2015 750 Individual Study 2015 751 Directed Reading on Southeast Asia Supervised reading of assigned works in Southeast Asian Studies. 3(3-0-9) 2015 752 Special Topics on Southeast Asia 2015 755 Labor and Industrial Relations in Southeast Asia 2015 811 Thesis 12 credits	
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If learning at least one Southeast Asian language is a hallmark of conventional area studies, only the program offered by the University of the Philippines explicitly qualifies among the four programs. No modular credits are allotted to language, but before one is allowed to take the comprehensive examination and embark on thesis writing, one should have satisfied the language requirement. The three other programs do not require learning a Southeast Asian language. Being an alumnus of the program, I recall the NUS MA in Southeast Asian Studies program used to include language modules among electives, but these modules have been

<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.fas.nus.edu.sg/sea/graduate/module-information/level-5000.html> (Accessed April 4, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> See <https://www.um.edu.my/um2017/academics/master/art-and-social-science/master-of-southeast-asian-studies> (Accessed April 4, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> See [http://www.seachula.grad.chula.ac.th/web/course\\_description.php](http://www.seachula.grad.chula.ac.th/web/course_description.php) (Accessed April 5, 2018).

<sup>14</sup> At the University of the Philippines, Southeast Asian Studies is offered as one of the streams (or majors) under MA in Asian Studies, <http://ac.upd.edu.ph/acmedia/pdf/Asian%20Center%20Catalog.pdf> (Accessed April 4, 2018). In a personal communication with the Dean of Asian Center, Dr. Joefe Santarita, he confirmed the effort to include ASEAN Studies among the streams students may opt to take (May 15, 2018).

excluded since over a decade ago.<sup>15</sup> It must be specified though that the Southeast Asian Studies program both in NUS and UM have undergraduate counterparts, where language competence is given due emphasis. Any graduate of these programs who wishes to pursue a MA degree in Southeast Asian Studies no longer needs language modules. However, for those who were admitted into the program but did not have an undergraduate degree in Southeast Asian Studies, the lack of opportunity for language training leaves a hole in their pursuit of an area studies program. If any language requirement is stipulated in admission policies, it is proficiency in English, as all the programs are delivered in English.

The proximity of the UP version of Asian Studies to the American model of area studies may be explained by the close academic and intellectual ties between the USA and its former colony. With early generations of Filipino scholars in various disciplines being trained in various graduate studies programs there, the area studies versus disciplines debates that were persistent in the US academy were echoed in the academic discourses in the Philippines, at least in the flagship institution, University of the Philippines in Diliman (UP-D) and a host of other major universities. The Institute of Asian Studies (IAS) was established in UP-D in 1955, and it was reorganized as the Asian Center in 1968 with the explicit intent to pursue area studies objectives. Part of the reasons for the decades-long tension between the Asian Center and other discipline-based faculties at the UP-D such as College of Social Science and Philosophy (CSSP) and College of Arts and Letters (CAL) were rooted in the tensions between area studies and disciplines that were persistent in the USA. As an iteration of the American-style area studies it is probably the earliest of its kind in the region.

One of the hypotheses that this study seeks to address is whether the existing Southeast Asian Studies programs can accommodate greater emphasis on ASEAN so as to render a separate ASEAN Studies redundant or irrelevant. If the curricular

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<sup>15</sup> I undertook the MA Southeast Asian Studies at the NUS in 2000-2001 and I remember Bahasa Indonesia and Thai among the language modules which MA students may opt to take. I took Bahasa Indonesia for two semesters.

structures prove amenable to accommodating ASEAN Studies elements, the question becomes why still develop separate programs, given the built-in accommodative mechanism within existing programs? Examining closely the module offerings of the four programs reveals that the NUS version offers three modules that are closely related to the study of ASEAN as institution or organization (SE5232 Southeast Asia and Regionalism, SE5233 Economies of Southeast Asia, SE5234 The Political Economy of Southeast Asia). Chulalongkorn's program structure indicates two (2015 708 ASEAN in Regional and Global Context and 2015 718 Regionalism and Regional Organizations in Southeast Asia). UP's version, for its part, offers five<sup>16</sup> and UM's version offers only one (ATGH6103-Regionalism in Southeast Asia). If regionalism, ASEAN and their cognate subject matters have long been a part of the curricular offering of the four programs, there seems to be no reason why they (NUS and Chulalongkorn, and to a lesser extent UP-D) cannot be revised to accommodate more detailed or specific modules on ASEAN as an institution or international organization. That UP's version has five ASEAN-related modules suggests that the existing Southeast Asian Studies framework is flexible enough to absorb such modules. The implications seem to be that there is really no need for separate ASEAN Studies programs.

If that is the case, what could have prompted the creation and proliferation of separate ASEAN Studies programs? Pending verification by those who were actually involved in the formative processes of ASEAN Studies programs, the following points are offered here as hypotheses that await testing. I reiterate that accessibility and availability of information is the main reason for choosing the three ASEAN Studies programs as spelled out in detail in Table 2. The first is the joint-program offered by five Open Universities in the region. The second is offered by University of Malaya and the third was established in Thammasat University in Thailand. The case of the University of Malaya (UM) is striking

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<sup>16</sup> Security Issues in the Asia Pacific (AS211); Regionalism and Community Building in Asia (AS 212). Social and Economic Development in Southeast Asia (AS 255.1); Politics and Governance in Southeast Asia (AS255.2); International Relations of Southeast Asia and ASEAN (AS256).

because the University offers both a MA in Southeast Asian Studies (noted above) and International Masters in ASEAN Studies, which raises the question of why the need for two programs?

A standout feature of UM's ASEAN Studies program is the unequivocal focus on ASEAN as an institution or organization. The modules being offered in this program seek to discuss in detail institutional structure, integration processes, political-security agenda, cooperative framework, decision-making processes, external and inter-member relations of ASEAN as an organization, not as a geographic area. This fits into the suggestion that ASEAN Studies is a form of institutional or organizational studies, and not area studies. It is pertinent to note that this program was developed and is offered by a different unit of the University of Malaya, the Asia-Europe Institute (AEI). This institute has a fairly autonomous developmental history from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) which offers a MA in Southeast Asian Studies.<sup>17</sup> The institutional studies focus of this program, thus, owes this focus to the orientation of the AEI, which seeks to promote understanding of EU and ASEAN as international organizations. It is tempting to speculate about the inter-faculty/departmental rivalry or academic politics being involved in the establishment of two separate programs in the same university, but it cannot be ascertained at this point.

The ASEAN Studies program offered jointly by the five Open Universities and by Thammasat University are interesting in that most of the modules offered therein refer to ASEAN as the region, and rather sparingly to ASEAN as an organization (e.g. ASEAN 204 - Comparative Study of the History, Culture and Religion of ASEAN Countries; ASEAN 205 - Comparative Study of Social, Economic and Political System of ASEAN Countries; ASEAN 206 - Comparative Study of the Geography and Natural Resources of ASEAN Countries). In addition, Thammasat's version also offers languages (Burmese, Vietnamese, Indonesia), which as noted earlier is a key feature of conventional area studies. One can say, thus, that the Open

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<sup>17</sup> I wish to thank Prof. Dr. Kim Hyung Jong of Yonsei University who studied at the University of Malaya and who served as a reactor to this paper for bringing this to my attention.

Universities’ and Thammasat’s programs lean more towards area studies with some emphasis on ASEAN as an institution. Such orientation is not dissimilar to the MA in Southeast Asian Studies programs of the NUS, Chulalongkorn University and UP-D as discussed earlier. Pending interviews with those involved in designing the program to clarify what were the considerations they took in designing the programs, we cannot really know for sure. However, in a communication with Dr. Jean Saludadez, a professor at the University of the Philippines Open University who was also a member of the committee that designed the joint ASEAN Studies program, she confirmed that they took ASEAN in three senses: “as a collaborative-multilateral organizational identity, as a geopolitical region, and as the region bound by a common agreement” (email 30 April 2018). What may be said at this point is that given UM’s International Masters in ASEAN Studies program’s institution-oriented focus and that of the Open Universities’ ASEAN Studies look more like a conventional area studies, the typological divide between area studies and institutional studies seems of limited use to demarcate the current use of the terms Southeast Asian Studies/ASEAN Studies. While such a typological divide seems, at first glance, to make sense, in practice these names are being used interchangeably in the contemporary academic community. It appears that increasingly, the term ASEAN is now being viewed by more and more people not just as an organization, but also as the region as a whole. ASEAN seems to have evolved to become a short-hand for the more “mouthful” term “Southeast Asia”.

<Table 2> MA in ASEAN Studies Programs

	<b>Joint Graduate Certificate in/MA of ASEAN Studies (5 Open Universities)</b> <sup>18</sup>	<b>International Masters Programme in ASEAN Studies (University of Malaya)</b> <sup>19</sup>	<b>MA in ASEAN Studies (Thammasat University)</b> <sup>20</sup>
Core Courses	ASEAN 201 -ASEAN Studies I ASEAN 202 -ASEAN Studies II ASEAN 203 -The ASEAN Organization ASEAN 204 - Comparative	QXGX6103 Research Methods and Data Analysis for Social Scientist QXGD6101 History, Society and Culture in Southeast Asia QQD7003 Political-Security Agenda of ASEAN	PD 601: ASEAN Cooperation in Political, Economic, and Socio –Cultural Dimensions PD 602: Institutional Structure and Decision Making in ASEAN PD 603: Research Methodologies in Social Sciences

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	<p>Study of the History, Culture and Religion of ASEAN Countries                      ASEAN 205 - Comparative Study of Social, Economic and Political System of ASEAN Countries                      ASEAN 206 - Comparative Study of the Geography and Natural Resources of ASEAN Countries</p>	<p>QQD7004 Socio-Cultural Cooperation in ASEAN                      QQD7005 Economic Integration in ASEAN                      QXX7001 Research Methodology                      QQD7002 Research Project                      QXX7002 Advanced Studies in ASEAN Regionalism                      QXX7003 Advanced Studies in Europe and European Integration                      QXX7004 Regionalisation and Regionalism: Theory and Practice                      QXGD6105 Economics and Political Policy Agendas                      QXGD6108 Functional Cooperation in ASEAN                      QXGX6105 Advanced Studies in Malaysian Politics, Government and Economics                      QXGX6106 Advanced Studies in Europe and European Integration                      QXGD6181 IMAS Project Paper                      QXGD6190 IMAS Internship</p>	
Elective	<p>SEAN 211 -ASEAN in Transition                      ASEAN 212 -The Positioning and Contribution of ASEAN in the Regional and Global Context                      ASEAN 221 -ASEAN Cultural Heritage                      ASEAN 222 -Art in the ASEAN Region                      ASEAN 223 -Music in the ASEAN Community                      ASEAN 224 -Food Culture of the ASEAN                      ASEAN 231 - Communication and Media in the ASEAN Context                      ASEAN 232 -Health, Social Welfare and Educational Issues in ASEAN                      ASEAN 233 -ASEAN Economic Development and Business Community                      ASEAN 234 -Politics and</p>	<p>QQX7005 Multiculturalism in Asia and Europe                      QQB7001 History, Society and Culture in Europe                      QQB7003 Political-Security Agenda and Foreign Policy of the European Union                      QQB7004 Socio-Cultural Cooperation in the European Union</p>	<p>PD 611: ASEAN's External Relations with Other Regional Cooperation                      PD 612: ASEAN Economic Cooperation                      PD 613: Political and Security Cooperation in ASEAN                      PD 614: Socio-Cultural Cooperation in ASEAN                      PD 615: Role of Thailand in ASEAN                      PD 616: Law and Regulation on Trade, Investment, and Labour Mobility in ASEAN                      PD 617: Media in ASEAN                      PD 618: ASEAN and Fast Growing Economies                      PD 619: Multiculturalism in ASEAN                      PD 620: Non-Traditional Security in ASEAN                      PD 711: Comparative Study of ASEAN Countries                      PD 712: Seminar on</p>

	<p>Governance Dynamics in ASEAN                  ASEAN 241 -Environmental Issues in ASEAN                  ASEAN 271 - Country Study                  Diaspora in ASEAN</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Indigenous Peoples in ASEAN</li> <li>◦ ASEAN Labor Economy and Human Resources Development</li> <li>◦ Agriculture and Food Security in ASEAN                      ASEAN 281 -Special Topics</li> <li>◦ Gender Dimensions of Development in ASEAN</li> <li>◦ ASEAN Science &amp; Technology</li> <li>◦ Peace and Security in the ASEAN                      ASEAN 291 Evolving Framework for ASEANOLGY Research                      ASEAN 299 ASEAN Colloquium                      ASEAN 300 Thesis</li> </ul>		<p>Contemporary Issues in ASEAN                  PD 713: Seminar on Selected Issues in ASEAN Studies I                  PD 714: Seminar on Selected Issues in ASEAN Studies II                  PD 715: Guided In-depth Study of a Selected ASEAN Country                  PD 716: Guided In-depth Study of a Selected Trading Partner of ASEAN                  PD 621: Burmese I                  PD 622: Burmese II                  PD 623: Vietnamese I                  PD 624: Vietnamese II                  PD 625: Indonesian I                  PD 626: Indonesian II</p>
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### III. What's in a name change?

The most clearly identifiable possible impetus for the proliferation of ASEAN Studies in the past several years was the launching of the ASEAN Community in 2015. The ASEAN Community was originally envisioned to start in 2020. During the 12<sup>th</sup> ASEAN Summit in Cebu in 2007, however, the members had agreed to accelerate the

<sup>18</sup> See the program website at <http://fmds.upou.edu.ph/asean/> (Accessed April 4, 2018).

<sup>19</sup> See the program website at [https://aei.um.edu.my/programmes/masters/2016-2017/international-masters-in-asean-studies-\(imas\)](https://aei.um.edu.my/programmes/masters/2016-2017/international-masters-in-asean-studies-(imas)) (Accessed April 4, 2018).

<sup>20</sup> See the program website at [http://www.pbic.tu.ac.th/main/sites/default/files/20155%20ASEAN\\_Studies\\_Course\\_Offerings.pdf](http://www.pbic.tu.ac.th/main/sites/default/files/20155%20ASEAN_Studies_Course_Offerings.pdf) (Accessed April 4, 2018).



timetable and set the target for 2015 instead. The Roadmap for the ASEAN Community was adopted in 2009 stipulating the steps to be taken towards the goal. Since ASEAN's inception in 1967, promoting the study of Southeast Asia has been one of the organizations avowed key objectives. However, the organization appeared to have not been proactive in this area. Southeast Asian Studies as a field of study developed rather slowly and unevenly in the region since the 1950s. This development was principally driven by efforts of foreign and local scholars, foreign donors, universities and professional organizations, and largely outside the ambit of ASEAN's institutional efforts. It appears only in the past ten years in the lead up to 2015 that ASEAN exerted some proactive effort to promote ASEAN/Southeast Asian Studies.

An anecdote shared by Charnvit Kasetsiri, a respected Thai scholar, suggests the increasing popularity of ASEAN vis-à-vis Southeast Asia, at least as terminology for a field of study. He has noted the case of Southeast Asian Studies program in Walailak University. Established in 2002, the program was initially doing fine but in due course suffered a sharply declining enrollment with only ten students left. When the program was re-branded in 2011 to become ASEAN Studies, its subscribers suddenly increased eight-fold (Kasetsiri 2015: 120). Charnvit attributed the rather sudden "trendiness" of ASEAN Studies in Thailand to a strong push to promote the study of ASEAN initiated since 2008 by the then Secretary General Surin Pitsuwan. It was a move that came in the wake of the Cebu declaration in the previous year, as noted above. The ASEAN Studies boom in Thailand which Charnvit observed was paralleled by what was happening in other parts of the region, where ASEAN Studies also proliferated. It is easy to see this development as a pragmatic response to prepare for the greater regional integration envisioned in the launch of the ASEAN Community in 2015. But beyond pragmatic considerations, is there anything more fundamental or substantive that we can infer from this development?

Thus far I have found no hard, statistical evidence that indicate people's preference for, or closer affinity to ASEAN than the much older term Southeast Asia. Anecdotal evidence and personal

observations, however, suggest that this may be the case. The decades-long effort of ASEAN to popularize itself, including the hype surrounding annual ASEAN Summits, and to construct an “ASEAN identity”, whatever that means, seems to be bearing some fruits. A fairly big survey done among university students across the region, for instance, that was carried out in 2007 and 2014-2015 indicate the high and increasing awareness and sense of positive identification with ASEAN among these students who, rather importantly, would constitute the next generation of leaders (Thompson and Chulanee Thianthai 2008; Thompson, Chulanee Thianthai, and Moe Thuzar 2016). This survey explicitly focuses on ASEAN and it does not deal with Southeast Asia as a separate identity marker. The increasing number of opportunities for intra-ASEAN people-to-people interactions via student exchange, tourism, study tours, youth forums, region-wide organizations, etc. help catalyze the process of regional identity-formation. The visibly more frequent use of ASEAN as an adjective to describe, say, an airline (Air Asia as “ASEAN airline” or the “ASEAN pass”), a space (“ASEAN lane” at airports for example), group (“ASEAN countries” rather than Southeast Asian countries), self (“I am ASEAN” or “I am from ASEAN”) just to mention some examples, suggests the multiplication of meanings surrounding the name “ASEAN” and its unshackling from its hitherto official mooring. It appears that people on the ground are using it more frequently for their own purposes. It has, or is about to assume(d) a life of its own, circulating as it has been in more varied and wider social and popular cultural spaces. Amitav Acharya’s (2017:36) observation that “ASEAN’s quest for a regional identity has come a long way” seems to ring true.

Archarya captures so well the dichotomy between Southeast Asian and ASEAN identities in these words (2017:37):

(T)he identity of Southeast Asia as a region should not be confused with the identity of ASEAN as a regional organisation. Although the two identities can overlap and be mutually reinforcing, they also have different sources and distinctive trajectories. Southeast Asia’s regional identity predates ASEAN’s identity...The Southeast Asian identity is more grounded in historical and socio-cultural factors than the ASEAN identity, which is more of an institutional, political,

and strategic phenomenon and is fundamentally statist and elitist in nature. Hence, although both identities have their limitations, the Southeast Asian identity is potentially more robust and enduring than the ASEAN identity, and could outlive the weakening or unravelling of ASEAN.

What Acharya may have missed is the blurring that seems to be happening on the ground between Southeast Asia as a geographic region and ASEAN as an organization. For an increasing number of people, the erstwhile purely international organization—elitist and detached or distant from the life of ordinary people—is the region, *their* Southeast Asia. Their experience of the region materializes every time, say, they go to neighboring countries flying on an “ASEAN airline” (Air Asia is keen to promote itself as one) without the hassle of visa application, queuing in the “ASEAN lane” at the airport, befriending “fellow ASEANs” through, say, the ASEAN University Network (AUN) gatherings or student exchange as well as via other “ASEAN youth” forums, or joining “ASEAN music” festivals or receiving “ASEAN scholarships” or watching “ASEAN football (AFF games), or reading blogs on “ASEAN life”. And when they go to other countries beyond the region where ASEAN is more familiar than Southeast Asia or their own country, when asked where they are from, they respond, “I am from ASEAN!” Life on the ground has its own dynamics that creates, re-creates, even mutates an entity, like ASEAN or Southeast Asia, in the process of day-to-day appropriation. This blurring is happening not just at the grassroots level, but also in the academe as suggested in the rather fluid demarcation line between ASEAN Studies and Southeast Asian Studies, as discussed in the previous section. Overall, the list is admittedly still limited, but it is expanding steadily in recent years. This development makes me wonder if the tipping point has already been reached.

Perhaps as a reaction to the supposed “constructedness” (constructed by outsiders at that) and fragmentary character of the region, efforts to push the internalist and collectivist viewpoint has a long history in the study of the region. It may be traced back to as early as the scholastic work of Rizal and fellow propagandists in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, or even earlier (Mojares 2006, 2013). Mining

the works of Southeast Asianist scholars, Amitav Acharya explores the deep historical roots of the regional identity of Southeast Asia (2000, 2012). This point is the basis for his prediction that the identity of Southeast Asia will outlive that of ASEAN, with the latter's history going back to only five decades. But this deeply historicist interpretation misses important developments both at the grassroots and at the academic level. What seems suggestive in the recent proliferation of ASEAN Studies, both as terminology and as a separate field of study, is the beginning of a new stage in the evolution of regional identity. Possibly, I hazard a guess here, it heralds a shifting attitude or mindset among more and more people in the region which might lead towards finally embracing or "owning" the region and calling it by their seemingly more preferred term, ASEAN rather than Southeast Asia. Despite its longevity the term Southeast Asia seems to have remained an abstraction for many of them, removed from the daily life of the people. What ASEAN has done in the past 50 year is, among other things, to set off a chain of complex processes, the latest being the launch of the ASEAN Community that nurtures thoughts and practices among a greater number of people that, intended or not, crystallize, manifest or embody the hitherto purely abstract idea of the region.

Southeast Asia is an externally imposed terminology. While it grants this part of the world a geographic identity, it is nevertheless in reference to something outside of itself, that is, the rest of Asia or the world. Arguably, it is better than the terms Indo-China, or the Far East, whose reference points are the giant civilizations of India and China and Europe, respectively. Nevertheless, it remains reminiscent of the time when the region was viewed from or created by outsiders. ASEAN on the other hand is, at least partially, internally constructed, and if we follow Acharya, parts of the impetus that gave rise to it grew from the impulses that have deep roots and a long history within the region. It is certainly an elite-driven project, originally in response to Cold War imperatives. For that it is often chided or faulted for its alleged complicity with the powers-that-be. But since "Southeast Asia" itself is a product of construction, and the processes of its construction were also compatible with the interests of certain groups (Bowen 2004),

neither of these entities or terminologies can truly claim innocence or moral ascendancy.

What seems to be happening underneath the apparently innocuous name change may be functionally related to van Schendel's (2012) idea of "geographies of knowing". Under this conceptual rubric, certain geographic concepts such as region, sub-region, nation, etc. serve as frames for organizing knowledge production, and the change from one to another could carry significant implications. "Southeast Asia" is a patently geographic concept and ASEAN is as we know an institutional or organizational name. But through time, as I have alluded to above, in the minds of more and more people ASEAN has become (or is becoming) co-terminus or even a replacement for the earlier Southeast Asia. The "geographization" (along with pop culturalization) of ASEAN, expanding its conceptual reach oblivious to the conceptual discipline scholars wish to impose upon it, is happening on a daily basis, as more and more ordinary people act out or consume anything ASEAN, "ASEANized", or "ASEANizing" (media coverage, music and telenovels, tourism experience, lessons in schools, friendship with fellow SEANs, etc.). Besides the top-down injunction from ASEAN and respective governmental functionaries, the proliferation of ASEAN Studies may also be partly due to the enterprising impulses of university administrators who saw the opportunities in bridging the official injunction and the growing curiosities and interests in ASEAN among the general public.

Lest I be misunderstood, let me offer a caveat. My attempt to explain the proliferation of ASEAN Studies is not meant to validate whatever conservative and self-serving political interests ASEAN as an organization represents. I recognize the risks of putting ASEAN as the central object of study. With or without intent, ASEAN Studies could and does legitimize the institution and practices that serve, among other things, the politically conservative interests that ASEAN and its leaders have promoted or defended since the 1960s. As I have earlier conceded, ASEAN Studies is far from being politically innocent. That said, conventional area studies as represented by Southeast Asian Studies has also been proven to serve certain political purposes (Szanton 2004b). So what difference does the

naming of a field of study by one or another term make? In my mind, at the very least by being explicit and calling this field of study ASEAN Studies, it is transparent or honest about the interests it serves.

#### **IV. Concluding Remarks**

From the purely speculative standpoint, the rise of ASEAN Studies and the incipient “pop culturalization” of ASEAN may represent one among several possible ways of pushing the boundaries of the logic that underpins the long-drawn out, endogenous effort to create and understand the region from within. At the initial stages this effort is understandably elite-led (in an intellectual and political sense) as exemplified, for example, in the aspirations of Rizal (and his fellow propagandists), Wenceslao Vinzons, and later on in the founding of the short-lived Maphilindo, but the vision was to trickle it down and encompass the common people. It is too early to say where the trajectory is heading, if the initial “pop culturalization” of ASEAN would be sustained, and if ASEAN Studies would continue to proliferate. These processes, like any other that depends on social dynamics, are open-ended.

If indeed the rise of ASEAN Studies suggests a reconfiguration of power relations, with the insiders taking over, or at least sharing equitably the driver’s seat of regional knowledge production, it only affirms the logic of power/knowledge. That is, whoever is more empowered--politically, economically, socially, culturally, religiously or whatever—tends to find ways to naturalize, normalize and justify their exercise of such power. When the proponents of ASEAN Studies readily accepted ASEAN as a given, both as an institution and as region, and at the same time take it as the area boundary of their epistemological geography, it was part of their interests, conscious or not, to relegate other things to the confines of “geography of ignorance.” Doing so has its consequences, good or bad. Contrary to the common tendency within the large part of the academic community to associate power with negativities (partiality, bias, self-interest, inaccuracy, etc), I take it as an opportunity for us to really notice the elephant in the room. However, in reconceptualizing

the notion of area to make area studies more relevant, it will inevitably reflect, sometimes without us being aware of it, the deep-seated desires, anxieties and interests of groups vying for better positions in the matrix of power relations. There is nothing inherently wrong with that, so I suppose. It may be in the nature of human beings, political animals as they are, to have self-interests and to work hard to pursue and nurture them. What seems worse is to deny it and mobilize and appropriate scholarship to conceal such denial. In the process, well-meaning scholars may end up doing harm in their pursuit of a perceived public good.

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