




## An Overview of Southeast Asian Area Studies in the Philippines



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[ *Abstract* ]

In spite of being one of the first countries in Asia to establish an institution devoted to the study of the Asian region, area studies in the Philippines has languished over the years. In contrast, area studies programs of her neighbors have grown by leaps and bounds, invigorated by both public and private support. This observation becomes more glaring as Filipino scholars have made a name for themselves in the field of Southeast Asian Studies abroad. The paper is an appraisal of the current state of Southeast Asian area studies and the extent of its operation by the Philippines' top four universities, namely: the Asian Center of the University of the Philippines, the Ateneo de Manila University, the De La Salle University, and the University of Santo Tomas. Starting from the inception of area studies in the mid-1950s leading to a template patterned after the North American – European model, the paper then describes the challenges and its decline in the 80s toward its progression on a paradigm defined by the growing importance of, and actors within, the region. The paper expresses the view that one, the role of the government was both a boon and a bane in the development of area studies;

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and two, that the rapid economic growth and immense integration in the region in the last two decades gave a new impetus to Southeast Asian area studies, an enormous opportunity to capitalize on for Philippine universities.

**Keywords:** Southeast Asian Studies, area studies, Asian Center, Programs and Degrees on Southeast Asian Studies, Philippine Center for Advanced Studies

## I . Introduction

The Philippines was one of the first Asian countries to establish an institute solely devoted to area studies on the region. Starting in the 1950's, the Institute of Asian Studies, now the Asian Center, was created ahead of many of its counterparts in the region. The Philippines has also produced respected scholars in the field of Southeast Asian Studies such as Reynaldo C. Ileto, Caroline S. Hau, Patricio N. Abinales, Filomeno V. Aguilar, and Vicente Rafael. Yet, area studies on Southeast Asia has languished, or regressed, over the past few decades. Today, students wanting to specialize on the region may have to go abroad for in-depth training. If previous generations went to the United States for this purpose, Singapore and Australia have now become the destinations of choice for the younger generation of students. But how about other serious students not fortunate enough to be granted opportunities? Where does one go to pursue Southeast Asian Studies in the Philippines especially when Filipino scholars trained in Southeast Asia area studies are to be found in foreign universities?

This essay is an overview of the current state of Southeast Asian area studies and how it is currently operationalized. Specifically, the paper shall focus on the top four Philippine universities who have the resources to pursue Southeast Asian area studies, namely, the Asian Center at the University of the Philippines (UP), the Ateneo de Manila University, the De La Salle University and the University of Santo Tomas. After tracing the development of area studies in the 50's and 60's, the paper then narrates the transition to the Asian Center and looks at the challenges in teaching

Southeast Asian area studies. The essay proceeds to discuss the other universities mentioned and enumerates the concerns and challenges in the formation and enrichment of Southeast Asian area studies.

## II . Area studies and the Asian Center

The Asian Center at the UP's main campus in Diliman, Quezon City traces its roots to the Institute of Asian Studies (IAS) established within the Liberal Arts Program of the College of Arts Sciences on November 28, 1955. A brainchild of then President Ramon Magsaysay, the University Board of Regents established the IAS to "develop among scholars and students of Asia a stronger kinship and solidarity and to preserve and advance a common heritage" (Asian Center 1968). The IAS was meant to provide an Asian perspective to the otherwise very Western-oriented curricula of all departments within the University, especially in the social sciences and humanities. To fulfill this task, the Institute set out to introduce the teaching and research of Asian societies and cultures which most Filipinos were unaware of. As the creation of the IAS was by way of a presidential directive, the IAS functioned as a separate unit and had a separate budget outside from that of the University's. This made it easier for IAS to fulfill its mandate. IAS subsequently sent a team of faculty to American, European, and other universities in the region to observe academic programs on Asia for the drafting of a curriculum (Isleta and Espinas 1981: 109).

The Institute received a big boost when the Philippines' foremost diplomat, Carlos P. Romulo, was appointed President of the University of the Philippines in 1962. Known for his scholarship on postcolonial Asia and advocacy for the promotion of Asian solidarity (Claudio 2015), Romulo gave his total support to the Institute. Under a five-year plan, Romulo set out to develop the Institute's academic staff and its material assets with ample support from foreign donors such as the Ford and Rockefeller foundations. Select staff were sent to study abroad while foreign scholars were invited to teach. A new curriculum was set up which emphasized the teaching and research of three regions-East Asia, South Asia,

and Southeast Asia. The Institute offered a graduate degree, the Master of Arts in Asian Studies, while the Philippine Studies Program was reverted to an undergraduate degree. Interdisciplinary approach was used as the primary mode of analysis in area studies. Patterned after the area studies programs in the US and Europe, the program boasted of faculty trained to handle the graduate program designed to produce specialists on particular countries. In 1967, the Institute awarded the Master's degree in Asian Studies to its first graduate (Isleta and Espinas 1981: 110).

With the passage of Republic Act 5534 in 1968, the Institute of Asian Studies was reorganized into what is now the Asian Center. The Asian Center was given a new space within the University and with it, a new building, Romulo Hall, named after its most ardent supporter who had returned to the Department of Foreign Affairs as Secretary after his stint as UP president. The new law declared the policy of developing closer and broader contact with Asian neighbors in order to reorient the country's national identity. Language and cultural studies were strengthened and the Center's academic journal, *Asian Studies*, was launched. Collaboration with similar institutions in the region was fostered: Kyoto University's Center for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Indonesia, Chulalongkorn University, and the University of Malaya. (Isleta and Espinas 1981: 112). This made the Asian Center the only academic unit in the Philippines with a regional area of specialization.

The declaration of martial rule saw another metamorphosis for the Center. In 1974, Marcos signed into law Presidential Decree 342 creating the Philippine Center for Advanced Studies (PCAS) which absorbed the Asian Center. PCAS was created to aid the government in foreign policy formulation. This was after all a time when the Philippines had to grapple with a growing Marxist insurgency, secessionism in Mindanao, the success of communist revolutions in the former Indochinese states, the opening of relations with China, the former Soviet Union and Eastern bloc countries, and a host of other concerns. Therefore, the thrust of area studies also had to change. The previous stress on history, society, and culture studies, was focused towards security. It was not enough for the Center to provide support in opening relations with other Asian countries,

there was also a need to assess their capabilities and structures (Malay 2003: 39). Consequently, library acquisitions were now diverted on specialized and pricey publications such as the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (or FBIS) published by the Central Intelligence Agency and the Joint Publication Research Service (JPRS) of the US Department of Defense.

Inside the PCAS, new centers were created, among them the Islamic Center, the Institute of Security Studies, and the Institute of Philippine Studies. The Islamic Center produced some of the major works on Muslim identity in the southern Philippines (Majul 1973; Jocano 1983). In the Southeast Asian Studies Program of the Asian Center, Indonesian Studies was initially handled by a faculty who trained at Cornell's Southeast Asian Studies Program and did work on Indonesian politics (Rocamora 1975). By the mid-70's however, Rocamora had to leave the PCAS for his involvement in radical politics. Interest on Southeast Asia was also driven to great extent by the dramatic events unfolding in Vietnam as well as the growing interest among academics and activists who wanted to analyze the nature of revolutions that engulfed the former Indochina region. The same may be said of the Asian Center faculty. Two faculty members handled courses on the region, one for Vietnam (Malay 1993, 1981) and another one for Cambodia (Ragos-Espinas 1983). As King (2012: 323) has observed, "Area studies have been sites of conflict as much as much as they have been sites of common purpose."

A year after Marcos was deposed in 1986, the PCAS was abolished and reverted again to the Asian Center. However, the status and prestige of the Asian Center declined dramatically, its close association with Marcos worsening the situation. Even within the UP community, the Asian Center was scoffed at for it was an oddity – a Marcos-created institution separate from the University but at the same time occupying space and granting graduate degrees. Besides, the scholarship was considered very empirical, almost atheoretical by traditional and well-established disciplines. Moreover, the Cory Aquino years were a time for introspection, putting much attention to the country's many ills and finding ways to undo the legacies of the dictatorship (Bautista 2000). Thus, area studies was considered not only out of fashion, but more so as a

first world luxury that the Philippines can do without in the meantime (Malay 2003: 42).

I came to the Asian Center when it was perhaps at its lowest ebb. The Center attracted a few number of students compared to the disciplinal degrees in the social sciences. Even then, Southeast Asian Studies was a far third behind Japanese and Chinese Studies in terms of choice for new students. In our batch of eight students, seven chose to study Japan (thanks largely to a grant for a study tour the following Summer). I was the only one who ventured into Southeast Asia.

External funding windows may partly explain the popularity of Japanese and Chinese Studies. However, there are other reasons for their popularity. The phenomenal rise of Japan as a world economic powerhouse, and at the same time its popular culture, may be contributing factors that made Japanese Studies appealing. In the case of China, the opening of diplomatic relations made travel to China imperative for Filipinos with Chinese ancestry to reestablish ties with family and kin from the mainland. Before the advent of Confucius Institutes, the Chinese government already saw the need to extend its Track Two diplomacy by way of cultural cooperation and educational exchanges. After all, Chinese Studies appealed to another type of student- local activists influenced by Maoism and the Chinese Revolution. Chinese Studies was also boosted by recruitment of a former University of the Philippines student activist who visited China shortly before martial rule was declared in 1972 but could not return for security reasons. He would spend the next sixteen years in China before returning to the Philippines in early 1987 (Miclát 2010). His expertise on the Chinese language and society appealed greatly to many would-be applicants.

The same could not be said for Southeast Asian Studies. There were still no funding opportunities available such as the Southeast Asian Studies Regional Exchange Program (SEASREP) and the Asian Public Intellectuals (API). Foreign language training was limited to Bahasa Indonesia whose instructors were furnished by the Indonesian Embassy. To study the former Indochina region was even more challenging. The long and protracted war in the region

precluded any form of exchange, with studies based only on archival research. Moreover, the holdings at the Library were very limited. Furthermore, the required language course was substituted with the colonial lingua franca, French, as this was the only related language available on campus. Even after the formalization of relations between the Philippines and Vietnam in 1977, bilateral scholarly exchanges were difficult to come by.

By the late 1990s, a rethinking of area studies was in order. Following all the vicissitudes that area studies had undergone, the core issue that needed to be addressed was its *raison d'être*- the nature of area studies itself and how to make it relevant. The answer as to whether Southeast Asian Studies should have an area studies or disciplinary approach became clearer. After all, Southeast Asian studies could benefit from related courses taught in the different departments. Besides, the so-called country experts lacked the training, skills and resources in the tasks they are expected to perform. Also, because of the unevenness in the teaching Southeast Asia, there was a need to shift to thematic approaches-conflict and security, ethnicity, religion, gender, migration, among others-which abound in the region (Malay 2003: 40).

Similar trends outside the Philippines made the Asian Center veer away from the country-specialist approach which was not sustainable to begin with. Consequently, faculty who were grounded on the disciplines but have worked on an Asian sub-region became the priority in recruitment. The curriculum was likewise overhauled and new courses were introduced. Core courses and previous electives were retained but modified to reflect a more thematic approach (Asian Center 2015). Today, the increase in the overall student population, and in Southeast Asian studies in particular, may be attributed to the prominence of ASEAN and the adjustments made.

### **III. Southeast Asian Area Studies in other universities**

Next to UP, it is Ateneo de Manila University that has the most potential and experience in offering area studies. Ateneo has one of

the most number of Southeast Asia specialists, some of which were alumni of the Southeast Asian Studies Program at Cornell University, while a greater number graduated from the University of Hawaii. Its younger generation of specialists received training in similar institutions in Singapore, Australia and Hong Kong. Before internationalization became the norm in universities today, many Southeast Asian nationals came to the Ateneo in the 1990s to train in the social sciences with financial support from the Asian Scholarship Fund of the Ford Foundation. The University also hosts the Philippine Office of the Asian Public Intellectuals (API), a colloquium of Southeast Asian universities and research institutions whose format is similar to SEASREP, except that its recipients were mostly intellectuals outside of universities. Moreover, Southeast Asian area studies have benefitted indirectly with the creation of the Ateneo Center for Asian Studies (ACAS) in 2001. Though a research center and not a degree-granting unit, ACAS continues to offer language courses in Bahasa Indonesia, Vietnamese and occasionally, Thai. ACAS also published papers on Southeast Asia from the international conferences it organized, and hosted scholars doing research on the Philippines or the region through its Visiting Fellowship Program. Lastly, Ateneo continues to train many Southeast Asian journalists taking up graduate studies through the Konrad Adenauer Foundation Asian Center for Journalism Program (or ACFJ).

However, Ateneo has not maximized the opportunity to create a Southeast Asian area studies program early on, its potential and resources notwithstanding. One reason may have to do with its identity and tradition. Taken from Athena, the Greek goddess of reason and intellect, arts and literature, coupled with the Jesuit emphasis on Catholic doctrine (as reflected in mandatory Theology and Philosophy courses) Ateneo's educational bent is steeped in the ascendancy and preeminence of Western civilization. Thus, a reorientation of this educational icon towards its more Asian roots would take a little more time. Also, Southeast Asia area studies was overshadowed by country-specific programs - Japan and China, and of late Korea,<sup>1</sup> whose external funding platforms were key

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<sup>1</sup> Ateneo is home to the oldest Japanese Studies Program in the Philippines. It was



ingredients to their birth and longevity.

An undergraduate program for Southeast Asian Studies was introduced in the early 70s but was closed shortly thereafter. In the mid-80s, there was also an attempt to offer Asian Studies at the undergraduate level but was abandoned even before it could be introduced. What may be considered Southeast Asian Studies in the interim period consisted of graduate and undergraduate courses on History, Political Science, Sociology and Anthropology and Economics. Bahasa Indonesia is offered by another unit, the Department of Modern Languages at the School of Humanities.

It was only in 2013 when the School of Sciences, with Filomeno V. Aguilar as dean, pursued this initiative again but subject to the approval of university officials. His training and experience would naturally point towards the introduction of this program.<sup>2</sup> However, the program could only be offered as a minor given the disproportionate number of similar programs vis-à-vis the number of students at the School of Social Sciences. Like other private universities, the viability of course offerings, i.e. the number of enrollees required for a course, is always a major consideration in designing a program.

With a new dean and director, the Southeast Asian Studies program began to take off in early 2017. The minor program, a joint undertaking with the School of Humanities, has a prerequisite of 5 courses (or 15 units/credits) - 3 required and 2 electives for completion. Three tracks are offered to the prospective student-Language and Literature, Politics and Economics and History and Culture. Save for two courses, the Southeast Asian

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also the first university in the country to set up a Confucius Institute. Housed within the School of Social Sciences is the Ricardo Leong Center for Chinese Studies. Started in 2005, the Center is also devoted to promoting cultural cooperation between the two countries. The Korean Studies Program, launched in 2015, was made possible with strong support from Korean educational institutions, punctuated by a visit by then President Lee Myung-bak in 2012.

<sup>2</sup> F.V. Aguilar graduated from the Cornell's Southeast Asian Studies Program in 1994 and recipient of the Lauriston Sharp Award. He taught at the National University of Singapore and James Cook University in Australia before moving to Ateneo. For examples of his work, see Aguilar (2014) and (1998).

Studies Minor Program does not offer its own courses, but rather draws upon area-related courses offered by the various departments. The two courses it offered were electives which covered 6 units or credits and only given during the Summer Term. Southeast Asian Studies (SEAS) 101 is an In-Country Field Study where students are immersed in the history, culture and language of a particular country (Brunei Darussalam being the first) while SEAS 102 (Philippine–ASEAN Summer Internship) aims to expose students to the workings of the regional organization.

Ateneo also took other steps to anchor itself closer to the Southeast Asian region. It began to participate actively in the ASEAN University Network (AUN), a major program in the field of education, science and culture with the end in view of promoting integration among the peoples of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). It has also revised its academic calendar to synchronize with the rest of the universities in the region. This was done beginning in 2015, a year after the first university in the country (UP) complied with this requirement for ASEAN Integration.

The De La Salle University also possessed the potential and expertise to venture into Southeast Asian studies. One of its senior faculty, Wilfrido V. Villacorta, was appointed Assistant Secretary General of the ASEAN from 2003 to 2006. Later, Villacorta became the Ambassador of the Philippine Permanent Mission to the ASEAN from 2011 to 2012. Some of its senior and middle level faculty have expertise on Southeast Asian studies, notably in the fields of security and international relations. Like the two aforementioned universities, a good number of region-related courses are currently offered by various departments within the College of Liberal Arts. Research, conferences, and publications on Southeast Asia were bolstered by its Yuchengo Center which specializes on human security and foreign affairs. The university also offers undergraduate and graduate degrees in International Studies, major in either China or Japan.

In 2013, the College of Liberal Arts undertook the creation of a bachelor's degree in Southeast Asian Studies, housed under the International Studies Department. Aside from the General Education courses, the degree requires 60 units of credit subdivided into four

areas: History and Economy, International Relations, Politics and Governance, Literature and Cultural Studies and Philosophy, Religion and Contemporary Society. Like the Ateneo, the university's curriculum reflected the support and collaboration of disciplinary departments, necessary in birthing an area studies program. In addition, a student had to enroll in 15 units of credit in any Southeast Asian university as part of specialization.

Academic Year 2016-2017 should have been the launch of this new program. However, this was postponed temporarily in view of the implementation of the new K-12 curriculum. Designed to adhere to international educational standards and make Philippine universities in sync with its regional peers, the K-12 added two more years of secondary education in 2016. This implies that for the next two years, or until 2018, graduating secondary students will not proceed to the tertiary level as they are rerouted to senior high school for additional preparation before entering university. The very small number of secondary school graduates from so called K-12-compliant schools entering the tertiary level forced university officials to defer the implementation of the Southeast Asian Studies Program until such time when the first graduates of the K-12 curriculum are to move up for tertiary education.

La Salle has been an active participant in regional exchanges. It is one of 60 participating universities in the ASEAN Inter Mobility for Students (AIMS) Program. Started in 2009, AIMS intended to hasten the process of regional integration by supporting student exchanges for at least one Term (or Semester) in a university of their choice – 7 in Malaysia, 4 in Indonesia, 4 in Thailand, 8 in Vietnam, 2 in Brunei and 3 in Japan. So far, students from Business, Economics, Engineering and Liberal Arts were made eligible to avail of this opportunity.

At the University of Santo Tomas, the Faculty of Arts and Letters offers a bachelor's degree in Asian Studies. This area studies program, set up in the mid-1970's, is the oldest in the Philippines. The program had withstood the vicissitudes that characterized the conduct or state of area studies in the past-small number of enrollees, lack of qualified faculty, little resources for library

acquisitions, to name a few. Despite these hurdles, the student population of Asian Studies grew steadily over the years. From only a few dozen students when it was first introduced, it now accommodates at least two sections (or blocks consisting of around 40 students) per year level. It boasts of a population of approximately 300 students.

Of the 201 units (or credits) required to complete the course, 67 units were devoted mainly to the study of Asia. Of these, 8 courses (24 units) focused solely on Asia and its sub regions *per se* while the rest were interdisciplinary courses on politics, economics, society, arts as well as language, seminar and reading courses. However, Nippongo and Mandarin were offered mostly in language courses. The curriculum has not changed much over the years. The university also has not been as active as the other three Philippine universities in terms of exchanges with its ASEAN counterparts.

#### **IV. Transitions and prospects**

The decline of Southeast Asian area studies in Europe and North America came at a time when the region was undergoing rapid development and growing in importance in world affairs in economic, social and security terms. As McVey (1995) observed, the Southeast Asian region has experienced rapid development more than Southeast Asian studies. Ironically however, as one scholar noted, the institutional crisis that gripped Southeast Asian studies in the US and Europe is not a major cause of concern for most Southeast Asians, it was of little interest to Southeast Asians, except perhaps for Singapore (Heryanto 2007: 76). But instead of going the way of area studies in the US and Europe, the fates of Southeast Asian Studies were reversed, marked by the increasing linkages and connectivity of nations and its institutions within the region. Marked by the massive movement of peoples, goods and information, this cross-cultural interaction defined Southeast Asian Studies which soon bore cross-country themes such migration, mobility, urban studies, environment, gender and religion and many more.

If Southeast Asian area studies started out from a colonial perspective (i.e., Southeast Asia was seen from “without” by traders, monks, scholars and travelers entering the region), the immense interaction among peoples of Southeast Asia precipitated a view that was from “within” and “cosmopolitan” (Bonura and Sears 2007: 16). As Beng Lan (2011: 14) pointed out, the future of Southeast Asian studies lies in regionally-located scholarships as alternative sites. Sears (2007: 3) further argued that rethinking area studies does not mean a better, a more precise and scientific inquiry but is a coming to terms with the politics, tensions, and gaps in the production of knowledge. For many practitioners within the region, an ideal Southeast Asian Studies program should be able to answer questions of people within the region as well as develop multiple perspectives (Baviera 2003).

The tension between area studies and the disciplines, as well as the general direction of Southeast Asian Studies in recent years were articulated and discussed several times over (Szanton 2004; Chou and Houben 2006; Goh 2011; Houtari et.al. 2014). In addition, the systemic or built-in disadvantages of Southeast Asian scholars and universities in this undertaking were discerningly noted by expert practitioners (Heryanto 2007; Reid 2003). On the one hand, this may look like a classic case of supply and demand. The lack of funding opportunities and priority led to a dearth of qualified teachers, scant opportunities for research and very limited library resources. Which translated to less interest and fewer students, making the program unsustainable in the long term and making it harder to advertise and attract its intended clientele. Taken together, this pattern perpetuates a vicious cycle. Furthermore, the growth and development of area studies on Southeast Asia has been uneven, as some countries had more resources to devote, and the research focus or emphasis equally varied depending on the country’s history and cultural trajectory.

The development of Southeast Asian Studies from its inception in the 50’s until the early 90s was primarily due to government prodding and patronage (Rafael 2004). Academic institutions were necessary partners of the state in the formulation of foreign policy as well as the training of its personnel. On the one hand, the

creation and development of area studies at the UP was sanctioned and supported by the state. At the same time, when the government's priorities and thrusts were altered, the Asian Center took the brunt, being deprived of funds and other support mechanisms. While private universities were not prone to this scheme, they were nonetheless reluctant in pursuing area studies due largely to its long-term viability. Impediments were overcome with the advent of rapid economic growth and the emerging importance of Southeast Asia in world affairs. ASEAN Integration is a promising opportunity that gave Philippine universities another chance to come up with a viable and sustained Southeast Asian Area Studies programs.

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