

Introduction

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This issue of the *Asian Review* has been put together in recognition of the achievement and milestone of the Consortium for Southeast Asian Studies in Asia (SEASIA) that has successfully convened two biannual conferences in Kyoto in 2015 and in Bangkok in 2017. The SEASIA, which is made up of thirteen institutions as of today, from nine countries across East and Southeast Asia, is a remarkable step towards encouraging region-based research and cooperation among scholars and institutions of Southeast Asian Studies and related fields.

The establishment of SEASIA itself and its founding objectives carry more than a slight connotation of postcolonial aspirations. Southeast Asian Studies, together with other area studies fields, came into being first in American institutions of research and higher education as a direct product of the Cold War and the expansion of US hegemony into various embattled regions of the world. The first major centers of Southeast Asian research were naturally in leading American universities—Cornell, Berkeley and Wisconsin being a few outstanding examples. Through the decades of the Cold War, research interests and funding started to mushroom across the Atlantic in leading institutions in Britain and continental Europe as well. International academic conferences across the Atlantic began to emerge and welcome research relating to Southeast Asia—from the Association for Asian Studies Annual Conference (AAS) in the US to the European Association for Southeast Asian Studies (EuroSEAS) in Europe and the International Convention of Asian Scholars (ICAS), which has come to be organized alternately in Europe and Asia. Yet, as the conclusion of the Cold War came to pass in the late-1980s and early-1990s and up to the end of the 20th century, the greatest powerhouses in Southeast Asian Studies research appeared to remain in “the West”—making scholars from the region working on their own native region a marginalized group in these American and Eurocentric international conferences.

Successfully establishing and sustaining an active network of Southeast Asian Studies scholars based in the region in the form of the consortium, and the accomplishment proven by its two conferences are, therefore, a noteworthy progress towards further encouraging regional scholars to research, present and publish from their home base and on their own terms. The theme of this issue of the *Asian Review* demonstrates the needs and our continued efforts to strive for a new and better understanding of the Southeast Asian region beyond the colonial and neo-colonial frameworks of the 19th and 20th centuries. There are many more aspects of Southeast Asia that need to be freed from the rigid narratives of the nation-state—a concept that was largely formed through colonial history and later shaped and influenced by Cold War politics throughout the 20th century. The five articles presented in this first edition of this special issue reflect the development of the history of the people and states in the Southeast Asian region that challenge the old frameworks of the colonial and Cold War narratives.

Starting with “Recording the past of ‘peoples without history’: Southeast Asia’s sea nomads,” Barbara Watson Andaya explores the possibility of recording and comprehending the history of a nomadic people that dominated the Southern Seas long before the arrival of Western colonial powers and the establishment of nation-states in this region. This article presents a bold move forward to write the history of a people that have been transnational since before the era of the nation-state and continue to defy national boundaries by their very existence even to the present day. So much of Southeast Asia’s history that is independent from the colonial and nationalist narratives are carried down the centuries through the existence of these often neglected transnational people.

The second article, “Civil service and oligarchy: American colonial principles in practice in early 20th century Philippines and Hawai‘i,” by Lance D. Collins investigates how the native populations in the two former US colonies of the Philippines and Hawai‘i differently influence the practices of American colonial administration. This article challenges us to explore the agency and unique identity of Southeast Asian peoples through the colonial period and under a uniform practice of colonial principles.

Paul Carter explores another unique event in Southeast Asia under US influence in the Cold War period in the third article of this issue, “How Thailand defeated Communism.” How is it possible that one of the most disastrous defeat of US military force in the 20th century be understood as a victory against the communists from the perception of Thailand—one of America’s most important allies in the Cold War in Southeast Asia? Carter’s article demonstrates how the Second Indochina War could be understood from a completely different angle from the perspective of neighboring regime and native of the region, the Kingdom of Thailand and her cooperative strategy vis-à-vis the US during the Cold War period.

The fourth article in this collection, “Dealing with diversity: State strategies on ethnic minority management in Southeast Asia,” by Matthew David D. Ordoñez, Hansley A. Juliano, and Enrico Antonio B. La Vi?a explores the post-Cold War strategies of Southeast Asian nations in dealing with ethnic minority groups. In this article, we could see the negotiations and compromises between various ethnic groups that have been present in the region since pre-colonial times and national governments that have come into being mostly only after independence and through the political framework and Western influence of the colonial and Cold War eras. How is it possible for nation-states, a foreign concept imported into this region only in the 20th century, to work in Southeast Asia despite the enormous diversity in terms of ethnicity and cultures within this region?

Finally, the last article in this collection, “South China Sea contestations: Southeast Asia’s regional identity and ASEAN’s sustainability,” by Victor R. Savage investigates the possibility of sustaining a homegrown Southeast Asian international cooperation network among the member states of ASEAN. Once the region has survived the eras of the external dominance in both the colonial era and throughout the Cold War, is it possible to finally establish a regional identity based on the independent and sovereign status of each member state and could this network of cooperation become strong enough to sustain the “Unity in Diversity” of the Southeast Asian community in the context of rising contestations over the South China Sea? What could be ASEAN’s future amidst the rising tensions between the two superpowers of the 21st century—the People’s Republic of China and the United States of America?

It appears that the history of Southeast Asia is one of constant struggle—struggles against colonial domination, struggles through ideological conflict of the Cold War, and struggles to have its own independent narrative as a region of independent people and sovereign nation-states. Yet, with these seemingly endless struggles, the story of Southeast Asia also appears to be one of overcoming tremendous obstacles and of achieving great unity despite what appears to be an impossible diversity of peoples and cultures. We hope that this SEASIA special issue of the *Asian Review* could convince our readers of the great importance and urgent need to support research and academic network within our own Southeast Asian region, in order to identify and produce a more comprehensive perspective of Southeast Asian Studies which will allow us a better understand our own region by the very people who live and thrive here.