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DECENTRING & DIVERSIFYING SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

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**DECENTRING
&
DIVERSIFYING
SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES**

PERSPECTIVES FROM THE REGION

EDITED BY

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First published in Singapore in 2011 by
ISEAS Publishing
Institute of Southeast Asian Studies
30 Heng Mui Keng Terrace
Pasir Panjang
Singapore 119614

E-mail: publish@iseas.edu.sg

Website: <<http://bookshop.iseas.edu.sg>>

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ISEAS Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Goh, Beng-Lan.

Decentring and diversifying Southeast Asian studies : perspectives from the region.

1. Southeast Asia—Study and teaching.
2. Southeast Asia—Research.
3. Area Studies—Southeast Asia.

I. Title.

DS524 G61

2011

ISBN 978-981-4311-56-4 (soft cover)

ISBN 978-981-4311-57-1 (hard cover)

ISBN 978-981-4311-98-4 (e-book PDF)

Typeset by Superskill Graphics Pte Ltd
Printed in Singapore by

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Current critical thinking on regions outside the West appears to have shifted from a preoccupation with the limitations of Western discourse to endeavours in fostering inter-referencing in Asian contexts as a means to decentre and diversify knowledge production (Chen 2010; Hillenbrand 2010). This book presents an instance of dialogue and elaborations among Southeast Asian scholars on their dilemmas and ethical recourse as they respond to the critique of area studies and new political-economic and cultural reconfigurations around them. It proposes that the contemplation of the future of Southeast Asian Studies by intellectuals in the region involves both epistemological and ethical questions: How can Southeast Asian intellectuals respond to current critical norms yet construct representations which are faithful to lived realities and meanings in the region and which can also challenge oppressive discourses at the official and oppositional levels? By insisting that theoretical distinctions are shaped by moral imperatives, this book hopes that it can help bring to an end the quarrel between insider-outsider or regional versus Eurocentric perspectives on Southeast Asia. The different interpretations between insider/regional or outsider/European perspectives may be more telling of distinct ethical-political imperatives in knowledge production than the ontology of Southeast Asia. Rather than being oppositional, these different perspectives may in fact complement each other.

This book is the product of the support of many individuals and institutions. It has its beginnings in a workshop in 2002, held with the aim of initiating an interdisciplinary and intergenerational dialogue amongst

Southeast Asian scholars in order to plan for a research-cum-retooling project for junior researchers from the region. The workshop was organized in my role as consultant to the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) of New York's Southeast Asia Programme. It was funded by both the SSRC and a Ford Foundation Seed Grant (No. 1005-0128). The venue for this workshop was provided by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore (NUS). From the SSRC, I want to thank particularly Mary McDonnell, Itty Abraham, Seteney Shami, and Craig Calhoun for their enthusiastic and steadfast support for this project. Without their wise counsel and the SSRC's provision of financial and logistical support, both the workshop and this book would not have been possible. At the National University of Singapore, I would like to thank Lily Kong, who was then dean of the faculty, for allowing us the use of NUS space, and also colleagues and students at the Southeast Asian Studies Programme for their kindness and assistance during the workshop.

The planning workshop eventually led to a two-year workshop series titled, "Local Scholarship and the Study of Southeast Asia: Bridging the Past and the Present", from 2004–05. This subsequent workshop series received funding support from a Toyota Foundation Initiative Fund (No. D03-P-003 28) and was jointly organized with my colleague, Reynaldo Iletto. I wish to thank Yumiko Himemoto and Reynaldo Iletto for making possible this subsequent workshop series. It brought twenty-five scholars comprising "junior" and "senior" Southeast Asian researchers to reflect on continuities and changes between past and present scholarship on and in Southeast Asia, with the aim of identifying agendas for the future. Insights gained from this subsequent workshop series have also helped shape ideas found in the introductory chapter.

Mainly, I wish to thank all the participants in the planning workshop and their contributions to this book. Although work commitments have prevented Kasian Tejapira, Diana Wong, and Liu Hong from participating in this book, their insights contributed as much to the success of the workshop. To all contributors of this book, my heartfelt thanks for their commitment and excellent chapters.

I also wish to thank NUS students who helped with logistics and served as rapporteurs during the planning workshop: Karen Chua Ee Hsuan, Haydon Leslie Cherry, Chew Kee Seng, and Vernie Oliverio. I want to thank Annie Karmel especially for her editorial assistance. This book has also benefited from Stephen Logan's skilful editing and I would like to thank him and his team at ISEAS.

Last, but not least, I am deeply indebted to four individuals who have provided invaluable intellectual support and help in refining the introductory chapter: Wendy Mee, Abidin Kusno, Tom Bender, and Joel S. Kahn. Wendy's input helped refine my early drafts. Abidin, Tom and Joel provided insightful comments which helped improve the coherency of arguments and Joel's fine sense of language further helped refine the presentation of the chapter.

This book invites colleagues in the field of Southeast Asian Studies to consider the importance of contextualizing debates on the future of the field. The way forward for Southeast Asian Studies in an increasingly self-conscious global age will require all practitioners to be open to, and learn from, the translations of ideas and practices across different geographical boundaries, especially between local and international/Western traditions.

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