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ISEAS at 50



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ISEAS at 50

Understanding Southeast Asia
Past and Present

by

**Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong,
Professor Wang Gungwu**

and

Professor Leonard Y. Andaya

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Introduction

Mr Choi Shing Kwok

Director, ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute

It gives us great pleasure to present to you three public lectures given to commemorate ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute’s 50th Anniversary. Much thought was invested in the decision to mark our anniversary with public lectures. Instead of celebrating the occasion with a grand gala dinner as is the norm, we decided on public lectures because they reflect more meaningfully our broader intellectual mission, namely, to provide expert knowledge on Southeast Asia to the informed public.

The first public lecture was delivered by Professor Leonard Y. Andaya entitled “Developments in the Scholarship of Southeast Asian Studies” on 21 February 2018 at the Institute. We invited Professor Andaya to speak on the state of Southeast Asian Studies because it is important for a research centre to continuously take stock of its core activity. Professor Andaya charted the ups and downs of Southeast Asian Studies from the 1960s to the present. He began with the early works of scholars like O.W. Wolters and Harry Benda (ISEAS’s first Director) who wanted to bring to fore the stories of local communities. This was partly driven by the desire to give voice to these communities and partly by the need to understand the behaviour, practices and habits of local people as the Vietnam War raged on. Interest in Southeast Asian Studies declined in the United States after the end

of the Vietnam War. Many universities saw budget cuts and fewer PhDs were churned out.

There was a slight upswing in interest in the 1980s as children of migrants from Southeast Asia to the United States wanted to learn about the cultures and languages of their parents. By the 1990s, Professor Andaya noted that there were intense debates over the usefulness of area studies and if they should give way to traditional disciplines like anthropology and sociology. The 11 September 2001 attacks in the United States was another pivotal moment which saw a deft diversion of funds towards the study of the Middle East and South Asia because of their large Muslim populations. Professor Andaya also brought up the perennial question of English as the language of publication. The dominance of English as the preferred language for publication and, subsequently, peer recognition, came at the expense of publications in the respective vernacular languages of the region.

Professor Andaya also made a case for an “open system” of enquiry into Southeast Asia. By this he meant that the boundaries of scholarship should not be limited to artificial borders “whether constructed by governments, international organisation, or academic bodies — but by subject matter”. In other words, a thematic and helicopter approach to issues is preferred. Finally, he noted that much of Southeast Asian Studies today is driven by “presentism bias”, that is, research that is highly relevant to present-day concerns or subjects that are in demand by the job market. He urged that this should not come at the expense of textual and literary studies of the region.

The second public lecture was delivered by Prime Minister (PM) Lee Hsien Loong on 13 March 2018 at the Orchard Hotel. PM Lee had also delivered the keynote address at ISEAS's 25th Anniversary in 1993 while he was Deputy Prime Minister, and it was thus fitting that he would do us the honour again on the Institute's 50th birthday. PM Lee's public lecture was accompanied by a public exhibition that illustrated ISEAS's history, work and people. The exhibition provided the audience with an overview of ISEAS's humble beginnings on Bukit Timah campus in 1968 to its present-day location at Heng Mui Keng Terrace. They also laid out the evolving research agenda through the decades as well as the Institute's more recent archaeological endeavours in Singapore.

PM Lee's lecture began by making clear ISEAS's *raison d'être*. The 1960s was a tumultuous time in the region marked by the Vietnam War, *Konfrontasi* between Malaysia and Indonesia, and communist insurgencies in Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. Singapore's independence in 1965 came with its own set of domestic challenges such as unemployment, the need for mass housing, and a stagnant economy. Yet despite these urgent challenges, PM Lee observed that "Our founding fathers were acutely conscious that to survive in a difficult environment, a small and newly independent country needed to acquire a deep understanding of the region. Because small countries do not shape world events, events shape us." Singapore had to quickly acquire, in Dr Goh Keng Swee's words, "a delicacy of perception" of complex regional affairs in order to foresee difficulties and opportunities. In other words, understanding the

region was just as important as the pressing domestic challenges of the newly independent city-state. ISEAS was thus established.

With Singapore serving as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Chair for 2018, PM Lee went on to speak of the historical and contemporary importance of the grouping. He noted that ASEAN's original objective was political as the five founding members needed a regional platform for dialogue and co-operation. Through the decades, ASEAN had succeeded in forming a strong consensus for the international rule of law, the inviolability of international borders, and the legitimacy of national governments. It had also succeeded in economic co-operation in the later years. Today, the ASEAN Economic Community is a diverse yet dynamic grouping of ten member states with a growing population of 630 million. It is also a young population where 60 per cent are under 30 years of age. ASEAN could expect to form the fourth largest single market by 2030, after the United States, China and the EU.

Nevertheless, PM Lee flagged several challenges. ASEAN does not have a unified strategic outlook. One example of this is the lack of common ground over the South China Sea issue. Even the four claimant states — Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and the Philippines — have different attitudes on the issue. In short, ASEAN needs to maintain a coherent institutional identity while accommodating diverse national interests. PM Lee concluded by returning to the need for ISEAS to understand all these regional dynamics and to develop a “delicacy of perception” for the benefit of its stakeholders.

The third and final public lecture was delivered by Professor Wang Gungwu, the Chairman of the Institute's Board of Trustees. His lecture was titled "Before Southeast Asia: Passages and Terrains" and was held at the Orchard Hotel on 3 October 2018. While Professor Andaya's lecture dwelt on how Southeast Asia was studied through the decades, Professor Wang asked the more fundamental question — what was Southeast Asia?

Professor Wang began by observing that prior to the sixteenth century, the region was characterized by diversity of people scattered across the lands. They were too fragmented to form a political entity. Instead they were open to new ideas and goods, and were able to pick and choose practices and values to adopt, or what scholars called "local genius". Local genius allowed many Southeast Asian communities to reconcile indigenous features with political and religious practices imported from China or India. As such, there was no compelling need for these communities to form a region. After the sixteenth century, Professor Wang argued that it became "convenient" for external powers to see Southeast Asia as a region. The earlier Mongol expansion into China led to migration down from north Asia, thus creating a border between China and what laid below. Politics in Europe also began to have an impact in the region with the Spaniards taking over the Philippines, resulting in the latter's outlier status for a long time.

The eighteenth century ushered in industrial and scientific revolutions in Europe. They consequently shaped Southeast Asia more sharply. European powers in the form of colonialism marked out borders more definitively. The naval dominance of colonial powers led

to the dominance of inlands. Colonial ports gave way to colonial states, thus introducing new political entities to indigenous peoples.

By the twentieth century land borders across Southeast Asia were firm. Nevertheless, the Japanese invasion of the region and the response to this invasion from 1941 to 1945 were the most defining events in the shaping of Southeast Asia. Another key period for the region were the years between 1963 and 1967. They were crucial to the emergence of ASEAN in 1967, itself a product of the Cold War. The fear of communism and the “domino effect” theory helped coalesce the five founding member states. By the 1990s, ASEAN-5 became ASEAN-10. During this time, the grouping faced a new geopolitical landscape and challenges like globalization. Regionalism was in full swing and yet many member states continued to be preoccupied with their own national development and priorities built on colonial legacies and borders. In effect, national forces were creating tension with regionalism, thus producing contradictions that ASEAN had to grapple with.

Professor Wang concluded his public lecture by opining that while it was always good for ASEAN to speak with one voice, this should not be pushed too fast given the tension above. Furthermore, he mused that different external powers were keen on ASEAN speaking with one voice but only if this voice was united on its side. More importantly, the region needed to retain its history of openness. The ability of Southeast Asian communities to choose and adapt external ideas and practices, while retaining local characteristics was a strength and not a weakness. And it was this ability that would allow the

region to remain plugged into the rest of the world while preserving its autonomy.

Collectively, these three public lectures have exhorted ISEAS to continuously reflect on its research agenda, the region, as well as the contemporary landscape and challenges it has to operate in. They illustrate vividly how interest in Southeast Asian Studies waxed and waned over decades according to geopolitical concerns, especially from the United States; and more crucially, as a small country, how Singapore cannot afford to ignore or marginalize Southeast Asian research because our understanding of the region is crucial to our survival. We would do well to support Southeast Asian research regardless of trends elsewhere.

My thanks to Tan Chin Tiong, former Director of ISEAS and now Senior Advisor, who helped initiate these lectures. I hope you enjoy them as much as we enjoyed bringing them to you.

