



## SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES AS A FIELD OF STUDY: A LOOK FROM IDEAS BEHIND THE SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE AND INTER-DISCIPLINARY DEBATES

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### ABSTRACT

Since the early 2000s, Southeast Asian economies have been emerging as an outstanding pillar in today's globalizing world economy where the pressure to compete internationally has resulted in both an increase in academic efficiency that encourages inter-state and interdisciplinary collaborations and a resurgence of regional knowledge production to meet increasing demands of international businessmen, policy-makers and scholars who have begun to pay more attention to geo-politically important regions such as Southeast Asia. However, there is much contestation about the significance of Area Studies, unsolved contention between proponents of Area Studies and those of Disciplines, and the role of sociology of knowledge in facilitating Southeast Asian Studies as a field of study. This paper looks at the development of Southeast Asian Studies as a field of study which is characterized by the differences of the notion, scale and margin of "Southeast Asia region" across societies basically driven by the ideas behind sociology of knowledge approach. It then identifies and analyses major reasons fueling the existing tensions between Area specialists and skeptics as well as in what ways these tensions have been apparent. It is worth observing that the neo-liberalism progress, followed by deterritorialism, is assisting in increasing scholar mobility and closer collaboration between fields of research. This, as a result, paves the way for moderating the contemporary inter-disciplinary debates and increasing joint development though an international recognition of Area Studies in general does not seem to come by easily at the moment.

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### 1 INTRODUCTION

The decades-long Cold War completely ended in early 1990s, but opened up a persistent debate on the role and significance of Area Studies in today's globalizing world.<sup>1</sup>Area Studies, born and highly

may conceptualize it in different ways. However, many agree that Area Studies simply refer to interdisciplinary fields of research and scholarship pertaining to a particular geographical, political, or cultural region or various areas on Earth which include, but not limited to, sub-national areas (e.g. the Mekong Delta of Vietnam), countries, supra-national regions (EU), inter-governmental regions (ASEAN/ASEAN Community, TPP,

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<sup>1</sup>Conceptually, Area Studies are variously defined in literature as different scholars or scholarly institutions

flourished in early 1950s in the US, had worked as an Orientalism-driven interdisciplinary field of study serving security and political strategies pursued by Western governments against the Soviet-led communist bloc during the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet Union and its allies followed by the rapid decline in the number of Area Studies institutes in the West marked a backward step in the development of Area Studies (Bates, 1997; Szanton, 2004). Because of this, many disciplines specialists and skeptics contend that Area Studies are no longer important and its role should be ignored. On the other hand, advocates have argued that the rise of emerging economies around the world, such as China, India, ASEAN, etc. and the outbreak and diffusion of terrorism and other non-traditional security challenges in today deterritorializing world are key factors convincing us of the continuing value of area centers (Featherman and Vinovskis, 2001; O'Meara *et al.*, 2010). Though such debate seems to be more or less ignored by the international scholarly community as it has been overshadowed by recent outstanding achievements and developments in information and communications technology (ICT), it has remained persistent and intractable so far (Bates, 1997; Szanton, 2004; Kuijper, 2010).

What is equally interesting is the fact that interminable political crises and territorial disputes taking place around the globe, from the Middle East to Asia-Pacific region, all have made the public worldwide "deeply concern" over threats and challenges posed by those long standing issues. This, as a result, leads to the increase in great demands for knowledge of particular regions in which interstate issues occur. In other words, prevailing and unsettled problems [that are usually related to political interests, economic benefits, and territorial sovereignty] obviously require new and specific insight of related regions in order for conflicting and interested parties to find out certain solutions and responses (O'Meara *et al.*, 2010).

For instance, Western decision-makers must be aware of the strategic geo-political situation and other cultural features of Southeast Asia in order to

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MECOSUR, etc.) and geo-politically important regions such as Middle East, East Asia, etc. Typical Area Studies fields often involve history, politics, economics, cultures, languages and other related disciplines of various areas to understand and capture knowledge about those regions. Thus, they are categorized as Area specializations dedicated to specific regions, such as Latin American Studies, Southeast Asian Studies, African Studies, Chinese Studies, Asian-Pacific Studies, etc. (Cambridge Dictionaries Online; Ludden, 1997).

decide in what ways and to what extent they have to get involved in disputes existing in the region; the Southeast Asian peoples must be aware of the Middle East in geo-political, cultural, historical and religious terms so as to comprehensively understand in what ways communal secessionism, followed by terrorism and *jihadism*,<sup>2</sup> and other risks from non-traditional security have penetrated into their respective countries; and we may have to understand why most of today international organizations' boundaries, e.g. Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), no longer depend on geographical proximity. Comprehensively understanding these problems means we are experiencing and apprehending regional interdisciplinary knowledge which is only produced by Area Studies.

Accordingly, no matter how the debate goes on, the significant role of Area Studies must be acknowledged and, equally, it actually deserves as such. Indeed, many Area Studies centers have been newly established or resumed to work, such as those in China (Shanghai, Yannang, Guangzhou, Xiamen, etc.), Taiwan, South Korea, the US, UK, etc., and especially in several Southeast Asian countries. This phenomenon in association with the international recognition of Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore as a "major player" shaping the trends and trajectories of Southeast Asian scholarship indicate the resurgence of Area Studies in general, Southeast Asian Studies in particular, begin to take effect (Swhee-Hock, 2006; King, 2013; Kook, 2013).

However, the problem is that every process of knowledge production is believed to be more inclined to interact with complicated societal relations, according to the sociology of knowledge perspective. To be more specific: prevailing ideology and power owned by the leading class(es) in a

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<sup>2</sup>Jihadism refers to an ideology commonly shared by Islamic militant movements aiming to reorder government and making a "pure" Muslim society in accordance with Islamic law (the so-called Sharia). Jihadist insurgents perceive themselves as "the loser" under the process of neo-liberalism and see violent struggle as necessary to successfully eradicate Western cultures and other obstacles to restoring Allah's rule and defending Muslim community in their home countries. By doing so, they hold that jihad is not just a collective obligation; instead, it is an individual duty or lone guerilla warfare against unbelievers, in which Muslim combatants who die wielding jihad by "suicide bombing" are deemed as "shahid" - a honorific for those Muslims who have died fulfilling a religious commandment (BBC News, 2014; Baylis *et al.*, 2004; Zaheer, 2013).

certain society may govern and dominate the mainstream knowledge production in order for them to protect their own “political life” and “national interest” (McCarthy, 2006). The North – South Korean conflict, among others, is a good example of this. The North Korean leading party firmly believes that the Juche-based socialist ideal they are pursuing is inevitable and new-fashioned, and by doing so all of knowledge production within the state seems to be bent to the communist leading party’s will and aspiration. On the other hand, the US-backed South Korean government strongly denies that ideology while further seeking and heightening liberal democratic thoughts and values (Scobell, 2005; Jimenez, 2010; Szilak, 2012; Lee, 2013). Obviously, the ideas of knowledge – power – reality relationship fueled by sociology of knowledge approach are not deniable and still remain valuable for those who are interested in soft sciences – i.e. cultural sciences, including Area Studies specializations among which Southeast Asian Studies recently has been emerging as a cutting-edge scholarship of regional knowledge production.

In this respect, several valid questions have to be examined and clarified: in what ways may the stand-out ideas behind sociology of knowledge be able to help facilitate understanding the trajectory of the development as well as feature Southeast Asian Studies as a field of study? How does sociology of knowledge perspective explain the emergence and persistence of the debate on the identity and unity of Southeast Asia as a region? Just like all other approaches, sociology of knowledge has its own limitations. So, in what ways does it hamper or limit our effort to understand the features and development of Southeast Asian Studies as a field of study? And to date, in what ways have the Area Studies-disciplines tensions occurred, escalated, and exposed? Are these tensions inevitable and justifiable?

The main purpose of this study is to come up with how the sociology of knowledge approach influences the development of Southeast Asian Studies as a field of study. It first identifies and discusses several key ideas behind the approach which may help facilitate understanding the trajectory of Southeast Asian Studies. The paper then examines the ways that sociology of knowledge hampers or limits our effort to understand the features and development of Southeast Asian Studies as a field of study, followed by a discussion on the unity of Southeast Asia as a region. It further looks at major reasons fueling the existing tensions between proponents of Area Studies and skeptics as well as in

what ways these tensions have been apparent. In the last part, a critical argument on whether or not these debates are inevitable and justifiable is presented.

## **2 SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE AND SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES**

### **2.1 Sociology of knowledge: understanding and key ideas**

For some people, for far too long, knowledge generally has just meant what belongs to the nature that human beings are able to know and/or understand and cannot change. However, from a sociological standpoint called “*sociology of knowledge*”, knowledge is so much more and different! Sociologists have successfully demonstrated that knowledge, like other cultural spheres, is a product created by human society. In other words, all knowledge produced and developed by both “soft” scientists and “hard” scientists has its own social contexts that without these contexts, knowledge cannot be issued and decided whether true or false (Lagemaat, 2014). Accordingly, sociology of knowledge is known as a broad area that considers knowledge as a product of social relations within a specific context in which these relations are often influenced by power, ideology, and other social factors, and deals with how those relations affects the way people living in that context acknowledge whether their awareness is right or wrong. Take astronomy as an example. By the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, Claude Ptolemaeus, a Hellenistic astronomer and mathematician, initiated an idea of universal system in which the planet Earth was a stationary centre whilst other heavenly bodies moved around it. As this theory was suitable for the interests of Catholicism which was one of the most powerful classes in the then Western societies, it had been regarded as “a prime astronomical knowledge” for hundreds of years later. Therefore, it can be clearly seen that the specificity of sociology of knowledge is that it emphasizes the role of social relations, particularly the relationship between power and knowledge, which governs the creation of knowledge.

According to Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, together with Karl Mannheim, Michel Foucault, a postmodernist and post-structuralist, is considered to be one of a few scholars greatly contributed to the development of sociology of knowledge in the last 20<sup>th</sup> century. While Karl Mannheim focused more on “the idea of relationship” – the idea that certain things were only true in certain times and places, Foucault’s theories addressed the relationship between power and knowledge, and how it was used as a form of social

control through societal institutions (Foucault and Sheridan, 1995). Foucault (1995) also stated that much of knowledge we took was strongly governed by the ruling class. This was because in every society, from the Maya Empire settled in Yucatan Peninsula through the Catholic societies in Europe in the past, and even modern-day societies, controlling the creation of knowledge was the best way to maintain interests and power of the leading class.

In today's world, our society is constituted by new kinds of social organizations and structures, and as such the new sociology of knowledge was born to introduce new concepts that indicate how knowledge is socialized. According to a constructivist understanding, knowledge and reality have apparent interaction and they all are generated by human society – products of society in other words as McCarthy (2006) put it: "Reality is as variable as the knowledge that people have about it. We have no "reality" at all, unless we have knowledge to tell us about it". Thus, knowledge is created by human society, and knowledge and those who possess it, in turn, will help mould the society in which they inhabit.

## **2.2 Formation of Southeast Asian Studies: influences posed by sociology of knowledge**

Owing to its ideas above, sociology of knowledge approach actually helps facilitate understanding the development, issues, and features of many soft sciences, Area Studies among others. For Southeast Asian Studies, a specific field of Area Studies, these ideas appear to be clearer.

Like Area Studies in general which really took root and flourished after the Second World War, Southeast Asian Studies began to shape during the Cold War when the US and its allies faced threats from communist movements in decolonialtimes worldwide and the "communist aggression" (the so-called "domino effect" or "domino theory") in Southeast Asia. This made Area Studies, and Southeast Asian Studies in particular, become vital to the West's triumph over its "enemy" (Szanton, 2004; Kook, 2013). From this point of view, we can see the unity of Southeast Asia as a whole as an objective of study emanated from political motivations. In order to gain scholarship of the region, more and more US agencies, institutes and other foundations, Ford Foundation for example, have paid remarkable attention to study the region with an effort to "know the enemy" so as to "win the war" (Szanton, 2004). In doing so, the West is believed to be able to maintain their power and "national interest" in the region. Foucault's relationship between power and knowledge, therefore, is

clear. This idea helps explain and understand why the region was initially studied and in what ways it may further develop in the future. In addition, the differences and disputes among scholars on the scholarship of Southeast Asia (e.g. the mainland-maritime Southeast Asia division, the identity and unity of Southeast Asia as a whole, etc.) help us understand why knowledge is created by society. To be more specific, different scholars have different background and, at the same time, are affected by different contexts and ideologies. These lead to different outcomes of the idea of the region. For example, for some area specialists, Southeast Asia has "unity in diversity" while some others argue that the Philippines and other outliers are "connected more to a trans-Pacific rather than an Asian world" (King, 2013). Accordingly, sociology of knowledge plays a very important role in the development of Area Studies. It has reciprocal relation with Area Studies to be more exact. It helps facilitate understanding and explaining issues related to fields of Area Studies, Southeast Asia for example, and these fields in turn, to varying degrees, illustrate the ideas of sociology of knowledge.

However, like all other prevailing approaches, sociology of knowledge has certain limitations which may hamper or limit our effort to understand the features and development of the study of specific areas to a certain degree. The same is to Southeast Asian specialists.

The first drawback is the relationship between knowledge and power – an important idea of sociology of knowledge. Specifically, the scholarship of Southeast Asia may be influenced and governed by the power of distinct ruling classes in different societies in which Southeast Asian specialists inhabit. This explains why the scholarship of the region varies from the US to the UK, East Asia and even within the region. Take the region's political range as an example. In the colonial times, the UK scholars, as affected by their national economic interests, considered Southeast Asia as the area around the "British lake" including modern-day Hong Kong, but Burma and Indonesian Eastern archipelago (King, 2013). By 1990s, the West and indigenous scholars considered "South-East Asia" (SEA) as an area without Indochinese Peninsula and sometimes included Sri Lanka and Pakistan as well (Emmerson, 1984). This once again illustrated the crucial impact of the power on knowledge production of Area Studies.

Another weakness is that as knowledge is a product of a specific society, it depends on the development of that society's awareness and ideology. In the

case of Southeast Asian studies, the development of this field has differed across geography. The US and Western area specialists and officials used to impose their own experience on their study of Southeast Asia, while the indigenous scholars might do in the same manner with different academic and ideological backgrounds. This demands area specialists have to make international collaborations with their colleagues as well as with other disciplines scholars in order to make their Area Studies work refined and more objective.

What's more, as the field of Area Studies mainly focuses on a specific area, Southeast Asian region for instance, its outcomes are often "localized knowledge" rather than "generalized theories" that could be applicable to other regions even though they share a few similarities. This leads to the fact that the scholarship on European Union (EU) may not be applied into the ASEAN Community (AC) or MERCOSUR or any elsewhere and vice versa. This is also a striking limitation that the disciplines scholars have used to criticize Area Studies.

### **3 SOUTHEAST ASIA AS A REGION: LONG-RUN DISPUTE ON THE IDENTITY AND UNITY**

Area specialists from inside Southeast Asia and their outside counterparts have long involved in an intense debate of the unity of Southeast Asia as a region. Several major reasons are viewed. First of all, unlike other geopolitical regions in the world, the nature of Southeast Asia is conceptually ambiguous. The name "Southeast" results in debate on its range. According to Emmerson (1984), Southeast Asia was soon recognized as an area located between "South of China and East of India" and "variations in the rendering of Southeast Asia (...) have reflected political differences between Western governments" (Emmerson, 1984). This means Southeast Asian region was initially considered to be a minor region which was "familiar shapes of India to the west and China to the north" (Bloodworth, 1970); thus, the region during this period was only referred to the mainland area of today Southeast Asia – the insular part was still unknown. Since the World War II and throughout the Cold War times, together with the rise of Area Studies, Southeast Asia was located more clearly which comprised mainland area, insular area and Hong Kong – a part of modern-day China PRC. According to sociology of knowledge approach, we can see that the changes of Southeast Asia's margin and nature were obviously affected by political and economic reasons rather than its own inherent essence of geographical location and cultural connections which we are aware of nowadays.

Second, the idea of "Southeast Asia" was affected by the Second World War. If we remember that "making war means making maps," the war brought incentives for scholars and officials to work across disciplinary bounds, and as such it brought them chances to consider Southeast Asia to be a whole and reduce its range "without being fixed." Also, the war made the region a major policy arena in that "research on the region's cultures and languages was a matter of urgent practical necessity." However, due to the wartime imperatives, the task of definition of the region had been postponed and complicated (Emmerson, 1984).

Third, the divergence of ideology between countries in Southeast Asia during the post-War period had made political separation between "communist Indochina," "socialist Burma," and the other "capitalist countries" supported by the West. The birth of regional organizations in this time eventually did not meet the demand of identifying Southeast Asia as a whole because they did not cover the entire region and had different borders at all. Take the organizations of South East Asia Command (SEAC) and Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) as examples. SEAC was established in 1943 but "never covered the Philippine Islands, and for most of its life it included the Malay Archipelago East of Sumatra as well," though its role in popularizing the name of Southeast Asia was widely recognized. SEATO, born in 1954, meanwhile was in the same situation: "SEATO kept the name political and visible while further confusing its meaning" (Emmerson, 1984). As both the SEAC and SEATO were Anglo-American initiatives, respectively anti-Japanese and anti-communist and neither was anti-colonial, they themselves disintegrated soon later.

In the case of the ASEAN security incubator (before 1990s), politically practical reasons had governed its objectives and made it a sub-regional political organization rather than its very name – Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Also, the development of suspicions of that Vietnam is culturally and ideologically too "Eastern" (refers to China) to be part of "Southeast Asia" together with the isolation of Vietnamese decision-makers had actually enlarged the gap between ASEAN's members and Indochinese entities. However, as Emmerson (1984) argued that "the division of the region is in fact opportune" and that "nations come and go – why shouldn't region?", it can be seen that the phrase "Southeast Asia" just meant a very name rather than rendering of the reality. Though the founders of ASEAN considered the cultivation of Southeast Asian Studies one of

the organization's major goals, they had only implemented that mission by circulating information among the organization's member states rather than by encouraging their scholars to work with colleagues in their "enemy bloc" to study the region as a whole.

Finally, since the end of the Cold War and the birth of a "new" ASEAN made up of ten countries in the region, the dispute of the identity and unity of Southeast Asia as a whole has been cooling off. Also, the US and European scholarships on the region have been challenged by indigenous scholarship and the region's name and border are no longer vague. This is because even though the ASEAN in its first stage retarded the regional unity, it simultaneously stimulated the emergence of the promise of "Southeast Asia" as something more than a cartographic category to be fulfilled (Emmerson, 1984). In addition, indigenous scholars through collaborative research work on their own regional topics that are cross-cultural and international have increased understanding and reduced mistrust and influences from outside which often imposed by Western experience.

From sociology of knowledge's standpoint, the dispute on Southeast Asian unity as a region illustrates two essential ideas of this approach. For one thing, the political power and pragmatic reasons has controlled the scholarship of Southeast Asia as a whole throughout different periods of its past. Related countries, including ones inside the region, pursued their own "national interest" to draw the region's limit rather than pay attention to its cultural and historical realms. Consequently, as mentioned above, the impacts of ruling classes, i.e. leading parties, differed the scholarship of the region in different Southeast Asian societies, and of each country or sub-regional area within the region. For another, the idea of the interaction between knowledge, reality and power is clearly illustrated. In the case of Southeast Asian identity and unity, it clearly can be seen that the scholarship of the region was quite produced by different ideologies [from "Vietnamese communist government", "socialist-neutralist Burmese", through "capitalist insular Southeast Asia"] and it in turn would shape the way these governments interact and the reality they were aware of (Emmerson, 1984).

So, does it really matter that the region has identity and unity?

It is likely to be difficult to find out the beginning and the end of the intense debate on the unity of Southeast Asia. Emmerson used the metaphors of a

unicorn and a rose to refer to the growth of the region's unity. He argued that the region may never become a rose and the regional unity may be a fiction, but it is wishful thinking that "how to make the fiction useful enough to become true" so as to bring about the reality to which the region now refers (Emmerson, 1984). However, in my opinion, the unity of Southeast Asia does much more matter. First, historically and culturally, the unity and identity of the region as a whole are consistent with not only the extraordinary history of the region's name (as analyzed earlier), but more importantly the similarity of history and culture to a significant extent among Southeast Asian peoples. Geopolitically, making region a unity of economics and political viewpoint helps foster the regional peace and prosperousness as well as create a distinctive regional eco-political identity to compete and counterbalance with other powerful countries and emerging threats posed by forces of today globalization.

Moreover, the idea of Southeast Asia as a region is meaningful and important to those who live in, and study, the Realm. For far too long, the scholarship of the region has been governed by outsiders, particularly US and Western scholars' experience. As a whole, Southeast Asians have begun to see themselves as being "a unicorn" rising up in the wilderness next to China and India, and belonging to a distinct identity from outsiders. As a result, the identity of Southeast Asia grants people living there some consciousness of the geopolitical position they are taking and of the autonomy from the West and the East in terms of politics and culture. Of course, there have "familiar shapes" of China and the US and other parts of the world, but based on what has changed and evolved, I argue that Southeast Asia has its own right to become a distinct identity from the rest of world.

#### **4 AREA STUDIES AND THE DISCIPLINES: AN INEVITABLE AND JUSTIFIABLE CONFLICT?**

To a significant extent, tensions between area specialists and social scientists emanated from the unreconcilable differences between Area Studies and the Disciplines as well as the controversial role of Area Studies.

Firstly, unlike primary social sciences and humanities, fields of Area Studies are interdisciplinary (Kuijper, 2010). This means a field of Area Studies, a study of a specific area, country, or region on Earth, may comprise the work of social sciences, including but not limited to history, language, literature, etc. In contrary, social sciences "strive to

develop theories and to identify, and test, hypotheses derived from them” rather than seeking a deeper understanding of a particular region like area specialists do (Bates, 1997). In addition to this, Area Studies scholars, like ethnographers, consider field research to be one of their most preferred and important methodologies that they believe “serious scholarship” must be based upon (Bates, 1997). These reasons have caused the persistent tensions between the two schools for a long time because (i) the field-work applied by Area Studies researchers may outweigh the theories developed by social scientists, and (ii) disciplines scholars, on the other hand, argue that Area Studies research “has been less systematic or theory-driven – or, indeed, has contributed less to the refinement or development of new theory – than social science and humanistic research” (Szanton, 2004).

In relation to the role of Area Studies, social scientists contend Area Studies is simply a political movement, “an effort” of the West to know and win its “enemy,” so when the Cold War ended, the “historical mission” of Area Studies has been no longer important. Area specialists, of course, strongly reject such judgment. Owing to their significant contributions, they have demonstrated that Area Studies specializations are not merely necessary for policy-makers on geopolitical issues during the Cold War, but they have been highly diversifying and becoming more significant for global integration of every country worldwide in the background of intense globalization. This actually challenges the role of the disciplines whose theories seem to be saturated, and as such the dispute between the two is likely to go on and on.

In fact, the tension between those who support Area Studies and the Disciplines scholars perhaps took its root in the US where Area Studies fields were widely recognized since the 1950s. Most immediately and clearly, academic and economic factors affected the rise of the tension and were its manifestations as well. Academically, the astonishing growth of Area Studies in the US rapidly decreased in the number of students who preferred to pursue a degree in Area Studies specialization (e.g. Latin American Studies, South Asian Studies, East Asian Studies, etc.). By 1990s, the Area Studies departments – one of the two distinct types of units of Area Studies in US universities – have been struggling to compete with internationally oriented degrees provided by social sciences and humanities which provided students more employment opportunities, and to maintain their students and their status within their universities (Szanton, 2004). In relation to economic factor, the termination of Cold

War has led to a lower priority on area training, followed by the reductions in spending for Area Studies departments and related programs. In addition, due to the limited resources of time and funding, more and more graduate students have tended to choose social sciences or humanistic disciplines rather than area specializations (Bates, 1997; Luden, 1997).

Recently, the sponsors from foundations, Ford and Rockefeller among others, coupled with supports from governments worldwide and the waves of global interconnectedness and regionalization have made the resurgence of area specializations, Southeast Asian Studies in particular, since the Cold War’s closure. The new geopolitics and the softening of national and area boundaries help increase the needs of profoundly knowing and understanding of particular areas on the globe. In other words, the ruling classes as well as other “economic plutocrats” nowadays tend to prefer knowledge over specifics rather than generalized theories. As a result, the tension between Area Studies and the Disciplines, once again, has “woken up” though it seems to be more moderate to a great extent than it was in the past. I am of the opinion that this pressure is certain, unable to avoid but not justifiable actually.

This is because, though the Area Studies are actually younger, so as junior to the core disciplines, they actually interact indeed. While core social sciences disciplines, such as politics, geography, history, literature, etc., bring area specialists basic theories, the area researches in turn will bring back practical or field work results that help refine those generalized theories, and may help develop new ones as well. This also means the studies of area have contributed to broader disciplines in many ways.

To some extent, moderate contradiction may bring motivation and aspiration for the development and creativeness within these two schools; however, if the contradiction become severe and popularized, it will eventually postpone their own advance. So, why must one choose either Area Studies or the discipline? Advisably, it is clearly not necessary to raise a tension or academic conflict between them; instead, it doesn’t matter whether scholars specializing in Area Studies or social scientists or humanists, they all should better be working in collaboration with each other so as to create joint development.

## **5 CONCLUSIONS**

The resurgence and development of Area Studies in the post-Cold War has flared up a persistent debate of its role and significance. However, recent

incidents and developments taking place in the world politics and globalizing economy indicate that Area Studies still remains so important due to regional knowledge it is producing. The success and outstanding contribution of Southeast Asian Studies in the ISEAS (Singapore) not only meet great demands for Southeast Asian scholarship but also prove the undeniable necessity of Area Studies in today epoch of globalization and multi-polarizing world politics.

This paper, however, does not aim to focus on the role of Area Studies or of Southeast Asian Studies as a field of study; rather, it looks much more at the relationship between sociology of knowledge and the creation of Southeast Asian scholarship. In doing so, the study presents a critical chain of analysis contributing to underlying the idea of Southeast Asian Studies as a field of study. To be specific, the ideas behind sociology of knowledge reveal that due to the knowledge-power relationship, knowledge production and the reality we perceive are strongly governed and dominated by certain prevailing ideology and the ruling class and may be different from those existing in other society. Because of this, the scholarship and understanding of the Southeast Asia have been differently perceived by the US, its “Western Allies,” and elsewhere during the Cold War.

Also, misunderstanding and wrong approaches in area research work further led to tensions of the unity and identity of Southeast Asia as a whole in the past several decades. In this respect, I argue that forming Southeast Asian unity and identity means making the region distinctive and independent from other parts of the world: Southeast Asian scholarship may no longer depend on, or be imposed by, outside approaches such as the Racist Orientalism, Empiricism, and Euro-centrism, etc. (Emmerson, 1984; Swee-Hock, 2006; King, 2013). Instead, the last decade or so have seen a growing interest within Southeast Asian Studies about what may be called “the regional knowledge production” – i.e. the way knowledge itself is produced and constructed in different ways in different geographical locations at a range of scales (Ludden, 1997; Jazeel, 2015). Part of this is a strong critique against the so-called “imperial knowledge” from the UK and the US, and a call instead to attend to the nuances of local knowledge production about Southeast Asian Studies and its interests – the very way knowledge is framed. As such, a key interest in recent Area Studies has been to attend to the local or the regional, while recognizing global connections, but resisting the idea that we can interpret *all* things through knowledge generated in the con-

text of the West or America in particular. Hence, we have seen a range of publications on different topics about Antipodean perspectives, Canadian perspectives, Eastern European perspectives, Chinese perspectives, etc.

The analysis of this paper also traces the origin of the existing inter-disciplinary debate between area specialists and those majoring in the disciplines, and further points out both academic and socio-political factors that may account for the tension. What is necessary is that multilateral collaborations between disciplines scholars and area specialists so as to contribute to minimizing influences resulted from the limitations of sociology of knowledge in regional knowledge production. On the other hand, Area Studies in turn may benefit the disciplines by providing “pure” reality-based evidence to support, refine, or develop existing primary sciences-oriented theories.

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