

The Historical Construction of Southeast Asian Studies: the UK and Europe

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In this presentation the origins of the making of Southeast Asia and Southeast Asian Studies in the United Kingdom (with comparative references to continental European activities) are examined in an attempt to establish those factors which encouraged the development of this scholarly enterprise and those which stood in its way. The main moments, events and persons in this process of construction are considered with an evaluation of the contribution which British scholarship has made to this field of studies. A preliminary observation is that not only is it problematical to define Southeast Asia as a region but it is equally problematical to define precisely what constitutes British scholarship on Southeast Asia in that it was not confined to the shores of the United Kingdom. Of course, scholarship is seldom restricted by national boundaries, but in the case of British engagement with Southeast Asia we have to take into account the contribution which was made by expatriate researchers and teachers in centres of higher education in the colonies and dependencies. Prior to the 1940s Britain was not entirely dependent on the development of expertise on the Southeast Asian region in the home country. An important training ground for British academics and scholar-administrators was the University of Rangoon and Raffles College in Singapore. Following the Pacific War an interesting shift in the locus of scholarship also took place. The British no longer had a base in Burma and the University of Rangoon after 1948, but they continued to have a presence in Singapore and Malaya and also Hong Kong during the 1950s and 1960s when we witnessed the making and consolidation of Southeast Asia as an internationally defined region for scholarly enquiry. Expatriate academics were appointed to the University of Malaya, which was established in Singapore in October 1949 from the merger of Raffles College and the King Edward VII College of Medicine, and then expanded to its Kuala Lumpur campus in 1959. We should also note the important contribution which expatriate scholars at the University of Hong Kong, formally established in 1911, made to the study of Southeast Asia. Did these institutions rival Cornell, Yale and Berkeley for a time?

Profile

Victor T. King has been teaching and undertaking research in the sociology and anthropology of Southeast Asia since the early 1970s when he completed his Master's degree at the School of Oriental and African Studies in anthropology, geography and Indonesian Studies, and then undertook field research in Kalimantan, Indonesia for his doctoral degree in social anthropology at the University of Hull. Most of his career was spent in the Centre for South-East Asian Studies and the Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, University of Hull. He was appointed to a Senior Lectureship there in 1988 and thereafter to the Chair in Southeast Asian Studies (1988 to 2005). At various times he served as Director of the Centre for South-East Asian Studies, Dean of the School of Social and Political Sciences, Director of the University's Graduate School and Pro-Vice-Chancellor. He joined Leeds University in 2005 and became Executive Director of the White Rose East Asia Centre (WREAC) in 2006 under the national ESRC/AHRC/HEFCE Language-based Area Studies programme. WREAC brought together over 90 researchers (comprising core staff, honorary research associates and visiting professors) and over 20 research students from the School of East Asian Studies (Sheffield) and the School of Modern Languages and Cultures/East Asian Studies (Leeds). From August 2010 he was granted the status of Emeritus Professor of Southeast Asian Studies at Leeds

University, but continued on a part-time basis as Executive Director of WREAC until July 2012 when he joined UBD as Eminent Visiting Professor.